

やはり俺の 青春ラブコメは まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧



6
six

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6

six



- 0 やはい/**海老名姫菜**のミュージカルは腐っている。—— 012
- 1 嵐の中、**比企谷八幡**は滑り続ける。—— 018
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平塚 静

shizuka hiratsuka

由比ヶ浜結衣

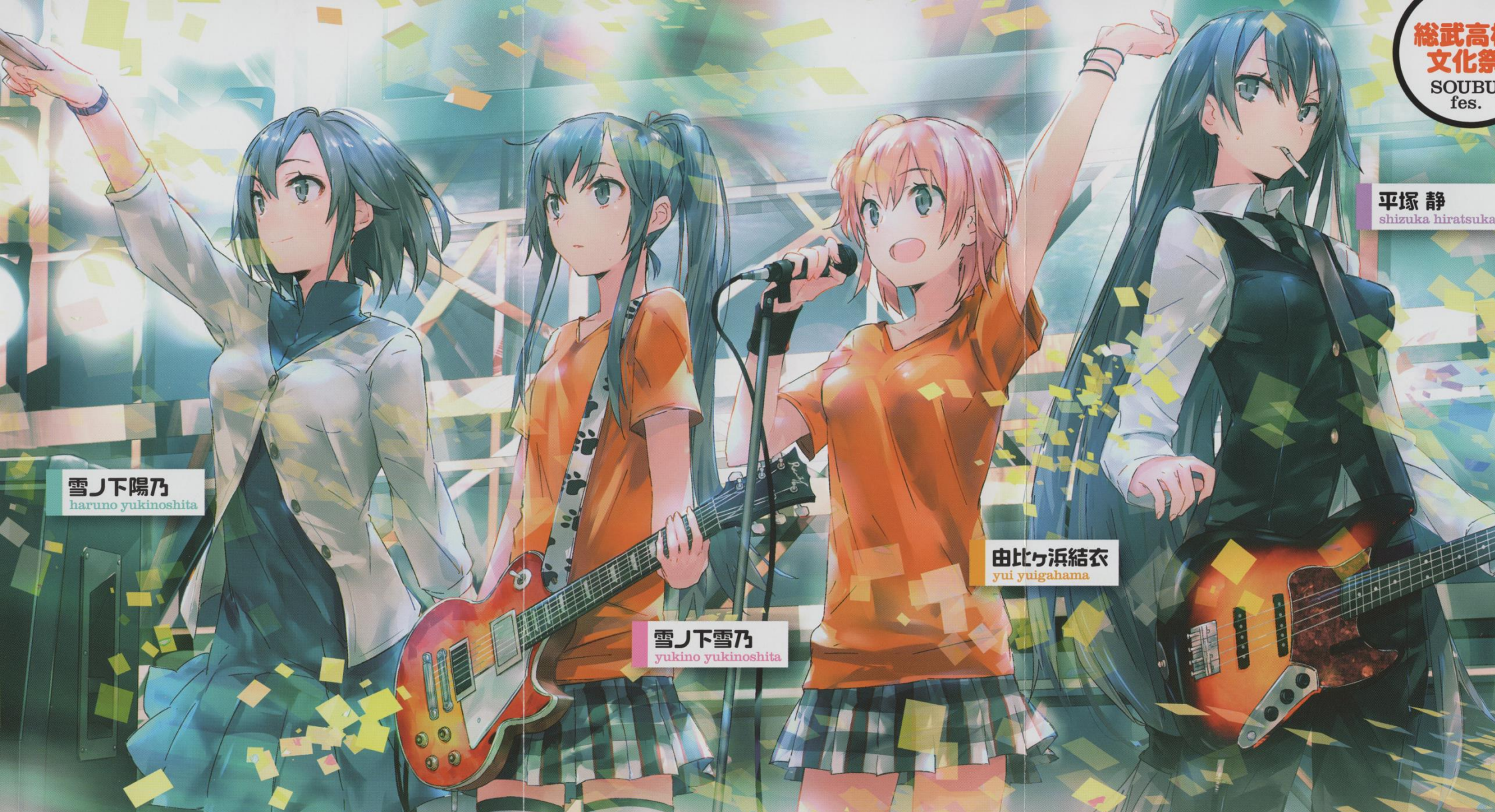
yui yuigahama

雪ノ下雪乃

yukino yukinoshita

雪ノ下陽乃

haruno yukinoshita



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MUSICAL

"The Little Prince"

Class 2-F

Culture
Festival

Exhibition
Program

Outline Target Characters

Complete reenactment of the famous novella, "The Little Prince", starring popular type cast, Hayama Hayato!

Sobu High girls, girls from other schools, women patrons

- ☆ The Narrator - A sulking pilot. Sulking gets worse due to making an emergency landing in the desert.
- ☆ The Little Prince - A pure, pretty boy. His purity makes him especially good at verbal abuse.
- ☆ The King - Very prideful, desperate to uphold his image. Has a commanding tone, using the pompous "Thus, I am". I want to smash his pride into little pieces.
- ☆ The Vain Man - Gets cocky when acknowledged, but is in fact a shy young man with no self-confidence. A guy like this is the easiest to make fall into depravity.
- ☆ The Drunkard - Drowns in alcohol. Probably is drunk from recalling a man from long ago and also from the circumstances. His pick up line is "don't indulge in alcohol, indulge in me".
- ☆ The Businessman - A romantic who considers himself an important individual, asserting his claim on all the stars. I want to pull his necktie.
- ☆ The Lamplighter - Bound by the rules, but a boorish, hardworking laborer, covered in soot. Stimulates the down and dirty.
- ☆ The Geographer - A shut-in who wants to be taught and learn about a lot of things. "...Let me see your Matterhorn." "See here, my Mount Everest is..." These two famous phrases are particularly well-known.
- ☆ The Fox - The very first friend the little prince meets on Earth. Teaches what's important in great detail.
- ☆ The Snake - Bares its poisonous fangs at the little prince.

Summary

- ☆ The "narrator", a pilot who makes a rotten emergency landing in the desert. Just in his time of distress appears the boyish "little prince". They gradually fall for each other as they exchange words.
- ☆ Eventually, the little prince starts propagating his long term history of men provocatively, earning him the jealousy of the "narrator", whose feelings unable to reach and has the little prince stolen away from him by the snake.
- ☆ And then, the "narrator" finally realizes. That what is truly important is true love, one that which cannot be seen, and what it really is...



Chapter 0

As expected, **Ebina Hina**'s musical is rotten.

...What a *greaaaaaat* story.[1](#)

As if.

I placed the exhibition program plan I was reading on my desk.

It was considerably dense and coursing through it was some kind of indescribable and freakish aura. If Necronomicon[2](#) was actually real, this was definitely how it would've felt...

Written on the cover was "Musical – The Little Prince". It was an outrageous name that sounded like the precursor to a tennis match[3](#).

The season was autumn. In autumn, there was the Cultural Festival. And the Cultural Festival, where everyone joined hands as an act of unity, was a somewhat dull season for those who adhered to isolation.

I wasn't intimate or attached enough with my class that I could call it *my* class, but the class which I belonged to, 2-F, from today onwards began their preparations in earnest.

After some complications, class 2-F settled on a play. It was a decision born from the majority, so I wasn't in a position to say anything. Wherever and whenever, I was always in the minority.

Idea after idea on what kind of play to perform, the result was a single nominated piece.

And that program was called the "The Little Prince"[4](#).

"The Little Prince" is a novella written by Saint-Exupery. I think there are a lot of people who know of it from its name alone even if they've never read it. "The Curry Prince"[5](#) is often mistaken as something related, but it's actually something else, so be careful there.

The summary goes as follows:

The protagonist, the "narrator", is a pilot who makes an emergency landing in the Sahara Desert where he meets the "little prince". Through all forms of discourse, they come to learn what is it that is truly important.

For something that could be claimed as a globally famous masterpiece, it was a worthy program for high school students.

But if there was one thing different... that would be Ebina-san being in charge of the script...

Right from the get-go, the character settings and summary written in Ebina-san's plot were already potent enough to break my spirit, but I braced myself and muscled through it. It was only when I came across the lines "the planet that I had gone to had 108 levels, you see!"⁶ and "a certain pilot and hentai prince" that I stopped reading.

What the heck has that girl been filling her head with all this time...? I looked at Ebina-san in fear and she acted coy and bashful.

"It's kinda embarrassing..."

No, no, no! It really is embarrassing, you know! "Kinda" isn't anywhere near enough to describe it!

I folded the printout and decided to not involve myself any further.

A gloomy atmosphere hung over the long home room.

"Is everyone about done?"

When most of the class had finished reading over the program, Hayama gave a sweeping look of the class and spoke. Originally, this was supposed to be the class officer's duty, but for the naïve class officer, he couldn't help but be frozen from the material that he couldn't wrap his head around.

"U-Um... so what should we do? If anyone has any questions or sees things that can be improved, then..." asked the class officer.

There was nothing but the latter, you know...

A girl in class raised her hand.

"Will there be any girls?"

"Eh? Why would there be?" said Ebina-san, tilting her head in confusion. *Stop right there, rotten Fraulein (as in a rotten miss).*

In "The Little Prince", no human female characters make an appearance. But the rose was written with women in mind, so the girls could work with that. But the rose wasn't the only role we had to consider, as there was the fox and snake as well. It's probable we could do something similar to how the Shiki Theatre Company⁷ performed "Lion King".

Another hand was raised.

"Will this be okay with public morals?"

"It's all ages so no problem!"

Who did she discuss the ratings with...?

It looked like the reactions of the class were concerned about how to take the news. Oda and Tahara or whatever and the guys had strained smiles, seemingly having a certain understanding of fujoshi hobbies, while the girls, excluding the few that knew what was going on, were baffled.

In that group of people, there was one person who annoyingly raised his hands going “here, here, hereee!”

“Hey, that sounds good to me.”

Whoa Tobe, being a little desperate with that appeal there, aren’tcha? A boy in love was so simple, maybe lovable, that it was abnormal. But well, I guess everyone was like that. I had an experience like that too back in middle school: I would freak out too much about trying to head home at the time as the girl I liked, but when she called me a “stalker” from behind my back, I was on the verge of tears... I mean, everyone’s on the same boat, right? Doing that kind of stuff, I mean. I wasn’t the only one, right...?

Tobe took scrutinized looks at everyone’s reactions around him and emphasized further. “This stuff is totes the bomb, yeah!? Doing something crazier than a normal play sounds more interestin’ to me!”

My classmates all looked at each other, realizing that was a likely idea, and gave it some consideration.

... Well, he had a point. This was at best just a musical and not some BL novel. I’m sure even the name of the title would give off a different impression too. If the play was going to be a stage for uncultured boys to profess their loves in eccentric outfits, it should look like a skit somehow too.

When doing a performance at an event like this Cultural Festival, the most important standards were it was “hilarious” and “different from others”. Both conditions were cleared with this script. Of course, putting aside the BL components in the script and the beliefs of Ebina-san the writer, shouldn’t this be OK as it is?

“Yeah, I think we can work in that direction too. Besides, it’s not like we can do something serious at an event like this... I can tell at least that much!”

Ebina-san was the type of person who knew how to be discreet. Then again, for a discreet person like her to end up like this, fear came knocking at my door again.

“Well, why don’t we just ignore what’s written here for the character settings for now... and we’ll go with making it funny. Is that okay?” asked Hayama, but there wasn’t a single voice that objected.

Well, it’s a Cultural Festival performance. The decision to do the play in jest than do it seriously was the correct choice. Doing it earnestly would just be embarrassing and failing could be forgiven with “it was for fun”.

It was probably better to do the play in jolly good fun with those components in mind.

“Okay, that’s what we’ll do then,” said Hayama.

He was given a round of applause. It was that moment when the bell rang.

After spending the entire LHR, our class was finally able to decide on a course of action. There were still a plethora of things left we needed to figure out, but we could actually start moving forward.

The Cultural Festival was just close to a month around the corner and this boring festival would be coming this year as well.

With a slight feeling of melancholy, I stood up from my seat.

Chapter 1

Within the storm, **Hikigaya Hachiman** continues to slip.

The autumn wind shook the curtains.

Glancing in from the fragmentary flashes of the other side were the crimson dyed cirrocumulus clouds. The slightly opened window saw the passage of the blowing wind.

That scenery continuously flickered and my hands that turned the pages stopped. The slight, incessant flickering at the corner of my eyes was aggravating. I wasn't able to concentrate at all due to how bothersome it was.

In contrast, from this end of the long table to the other, sitting diagonally from my position was a girl.

Yukinoshita Yukino had not the slightest movement since a while ago.

Her gaze was directed at the book in her hands, quietly tracing line to line. It was surely because of the window being situated behind her that her field of vision didn't capture the movements of the curtains.

Sitting on that side might have been the better choice. Regardless, given that both of our positions were already fixed at this point, taking the trouble to relocate myself literally would have been a bad seating.

Habitually, I would occupy the side that received less light from the sun, taking up the position away from the window while it was common for Yukinoshita to sit in the area where her back would receive the tender sunlight.

But now with the onset of fall, the sunlight was visibly dwindling. The day was getting shorter.

Summer vacation had ended and we were just a few days into the month of September. Strong traces of summer still lingered during the day, but we were transitioning to a season in which the evening would be imminent along with the sudden blowing of the freezing wind just like now.

We may have been entering the second semester, but our lives weren't going to differ all that much. As always, Yukinoshita and I had been making sure to attend club. Though, the only activity we really engaged ourselves in was reading. While Yukinoshita and I were engrossed in reading, Yuigahama was fiddling with her bothersome cellphone, the sounds of "click, clack" echoing.

The wind that blew by, stronger than earlier, shook the window frame.

The curtain flapped back and forth, abusing the page I was just about to read. *Hey, cuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurtain! For a while now, the curtain's self-assertion, "curtain, curtain!" has been really out of control, what are you, Bonchuu?*

Out of pure annoyance, I glared at the window and clicked my tongue. The wind was pretty aggravating in its own right, but so were the curtains that simply let it blow by. Where's your sense of self? The only permissible things that could be blown were the skirts of girls and Chiba Marine Stadium.

Whoa, at the corner of my eyes, a skirt flapped back and forth. The owner of that skirt, Yuigahama, stood up from her seat, situated midway of the long desk from my side, and shut the window. The bold fluttering of her skirt suggested that there might have been Pokémon lurking there, nearly making me want to venture forth. Phew, my Pocket Monster was *this* close to going wild there...

"The wind's gotten pretty strong, huh?"

Not a single voice answered.

Only audible were the reverberations of the clacking window.

Despite the lack of responses, Yuigahama opened her mouth without getting discouraged. "I hear a typhoon's coming."

Since she continued further, Yukinoshita and I finally lifted our faces from our books.

Yuigahama displayed a relieved expression. "The weather was so good during the break too."

"Really? Felt more like the days were mostly dark to me." I racked my head in contemplation, but I had no recollection of the days being bright out. The only memories I had of the DO-TEN P-KAN weather, the painfully sunny weather, were on the days I had left my house so...

"Hikki, you don't leave the house so of course you wouldn't know." Yuigahama lightly snickered. I guess so.

"...It's that. Light curtains are just too efficient nowadays. It's because of that that it's so dark."

"It's light, but it gets dark?" Yuigahama made a puzzled face and I found myself returning one as well.

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

After Yuigahama and I looked at each other curiously, I somehow realized she had meant something else. Hey, this girl wasn't seriously asking this, right? Oh gosh, what a scary girl.

Yukinoshita, who had been listening to that helpless exchange, closed her book and hesitantly opened her mouth. "...I'll explain just in case, but light curtains are things that block light."

“Eh...? Ah, t-that’s right! Yeah... I-I knew that...” Yuigahama answered, initially with a short pause from surprise, but at the end, she was totally looking away. With eyes that gazed upon a pitiful child, I added a follow-up.

“Well, you know. Light does have its ancient origins for Japanese people. Considering we have things like light-blocking clay figures, historically, we’re sort of like people of the light.”

There existed people who shouldered the fate of hating the light, but loving the dark. They were called the Japanese. Whoa, that’s one chuuni explanation there.

“Oh right! But I guess that might make sense if you put it like that. Pit-houses don’t seem like they’d have any windows too.” Yuigahama said, expressing a gasp of admiration.

On the other hand, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her temple as if trying to hold back a headache and sighed. “The light-blocking clay figurines are only referred to as such because they resemble the devices used by the Inuit to ward off light in the snow, so light doesn’t have any relevance here...”

It was a small voice resembling a gentle whisper. Those words clearly resonated, whereas any other sound could not.

“Ah, is that so? H-Heeh...”

The displayed embarrassment from her mistaken knowledge with her triumphant look was abnormal. *Jeez, there’s no way we can have a decent conversation now.* Most of all, the reprimanding tone wasn’t given any talk back, different from how it had been up until now.

“.....”

“.....”

Yukinoshita didn’t reproach her any further, seemingly out of consideration.

She returned to her reading again while I rested my cheeks against one hand, flipping pages with the other.

In the distance was the whooshing sound of the blowing wind. It was going “whoosh, whoosh” that you’d end up thinking it was a Japanese Railroad spy of the sort.

Only someone’s cough could be heard.

Upon realizing, the sole sound to reach my ears was the ticking of the clock’s second hands.

Was the timing in which people became aware of silence not all that different, I wonder?

Yuigahama took a deep breath with something in mind. “Hey Hikki, you should, like, go out more, definitely. You know, vitamin C? You’ll make stuff like that or something.”

“I think you’re talking about vitamin D. Making vitamin C or whatever, you some kind of lemon? Human bodies don’t produce vitamin C.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. By the way, apparently, exposing yourself to sunlight twice a week for thirty minutes is enough to produce the vitamin D you need. Therefore, there isn’t a need to leave the house.” I explained with a triumphant face. As one who belonged to the private liberal arts, when it came to bits of trivia classified as miscellaneous, I was strong. In fact, that actually might be a characteristic of those in the liberal arts.

Yuigahama’s expression had a look of hesitation, surprised by my abundant knowledge. “Why the heck do you know so much...? Are you a health nut or something? Gross...” She hit me with some horrible words.

“...Long ago, my parents said something similar so I looked it up.”

“You didn’t really want go out that much, huh...”

“Nothing less from Hikikomori-kun.”

“Buzz off...”

Again, how the heck did you know about my nickname in middle school?

I was planning to go farther, but I immediately stopped there... Well, not saying anything wasn’t particular anything bad. Right, it’s like, you know, I didn’t have anything interesting enough that’d be good enough as a retort. It’s that, you know? Just now was one of those patterns where staying quiet was correct. You get that sometimes. Whenever someone talks to you for just a little, you get carried away and make some sort of retort which everyone responds with silence. The sudden recollection made me writhe in agony.

But despite having said nothing, the silence didn’t change.

“.....”

“.....”

Yukinoshita’s eyelashes didn’t move a single inch as she apathetically looked at the page of her book.

Her reactionless behavior bothered Yuigahama as she tried to bury the silence with a laugh. “A-Ahaha... Hikki, you really are a hikki, after all.”

“Hey, hey, it’s the right way to live, continued by the righteous since the age of gods. Even the chief god of Japanese legends, Amaterasu-oomikami, shut herself in.”

I followed the legends and didn’t leave my house. I performed the acts of gods, in other words, I was the God of the New World.

“The gods in Japanese legends aren’t exactly all righteous after all...”

“Eh, is that how it is?”

“Pretty much... There’s quite a lot of that in polytheist stories.”

In reality, it’s a huge mess. If you read the legends carefully, you’d find a bunch of ridiculous stories all over.

Yuigahama moaned in admiration after that conversation. “When I hear god, I think of something perfect though.”

If it was the all-encompassing GOD, then he was probably established as such, but when you hear gods in Japanese, they weren’t confined to just perfection. The existence of many kinds of gods was this country’s legend. Absolutely righteous gods who were omniscient and omnipotent gods weren’t necessarily seen as such everywhere else.

When that came to mind, I slipped out some words. “... Well, forcing your image on things including gods isn’t exactly something you should do.”

I wasn’t expecting a reply from anyone. It was just number eighteen of my familiar and special monologues. After a considerable pause, a tiny voice slipped among the sound of turning pages.

“...I suppose so.”

She held the same opinion as well, likely not expecting a reply either. Her voice and her gaze weren’t directed at anyone.

You mustn’t force images on things.

Only gods were what you should expect perfection from.

You mustn’t demand an ideal from anyone.

That is weakness. It is an evil that must be hated. It is negligence that must be punished. It spoils not only yourself, but those around you.

You are allowed to be disappointed with only yourself. You should hurt only yourself. Hate only yourself for not following your ideal.

The only one who you must not forgive is yourself.

“.....”

“.....”

Conversation had halted. The atmosphere had frozen. Time had passed. The room was closed off, yet the suspended time felt as if it had brought down the temperature of the room.

“A-Ahummm...” Yuigahama alternated looks between Yukinoshita and me, trembling, and then dropped her shoulders.

Recently, there was nothing but these kinds of exchanges.

Everyone would try their best to talk and try to find chances to start conversation; they were those kinds of days.

This having been the state for the past few days, even Yuigahama was starting to get tired.

As if to destroy the room submerged in tranquility, the wind pounded against the window.

The rattling of the glass window sounded in the room, sending tremors to the air of the room. Yuigahama looked outside, hoping to trigger a conversation.

“I-It looks like things are going to get pretty bad, huh? If the Keiyou Line stops, Yukinon won’t be able to go home, right?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

If I remembered correctly, Yukinoshita commuted to school using the Keiyou Line.



If the typhoon said to be large and powerful were to set for Kanto, then Chiba would become an isolated island. Following the Keiyou Line at the head, the Sobu Line, the Jouban Line, the Keisei Line, the Toei-Shinjuku Line and many other railroad network systems would be temporarily suspended. We would be cut off from the rest of Japan and we would undoubtedly become independent.

Then again, Chiba sure had a lot of railroads. Besides the already mentioned, there was also the Choushi Electric Railway Line and the Kominato Line, both of which were in a good sense, shabby railroads. Even more, there were the major ones like the Uchibo Line and the Sotobo Line, but unfortunately, you'd find it hard to differentiate between the two if you lived near Tokyo. Sometimes when you honestly mistaken them, you'd get yelled like a raging fire. The anger of the citizens of Chiba was the Flame of Recca!

Anyway, if a typhoon came around, the numerous urban city transportation facilities would be halted. Even Yukinoshita wouldn't be able to avoid being influenced by that.

"I know, right. So, like, my house is pretty close..." Yuigahama tried to speak her words, but stopped.

When I looked around, bothered by the bizarre silence that sprouted up, Yukinoshita was making an extremely, painful expression.

"...It's fine. When that time comes, I can walk back home."

"I-I see. It's not, like you can't walk that distance or anything."

The nearest station Yukinoshita lived next to was about two stations away. It definitely was a walkable distance.

Yuigahama adjusted her disposition and talked to me. "Hikki, are you going home by bike?"

"Yeah". I answered and looked outside. Luckily, there wasn't any rain yet. I brought my umbrella just in case, but I wanted to avoid going home while using it in the middle of a typhoon.

"Why not go home on the bus at least for these kinds of days?"

"I don't like how crowded the buses are, so no."

Add in the fact that it was ridden by mostly our students. If I bumped into a classmate, it'd be a big problem. It was fine if it was someone that did me the favor of ignoring me. It really was painful forcing people to be weirdly considerate of me and stop their enjoyable chatter. My chest would be full of guilt. It was on the level of Dazai, where I'd apologize for being born out of reflex.

Above all else, going home on the bus at this time meant doing so together with Yuigahama. And this is Yuigahama we're talking about here. There was no doubt she would try to talk to me somehow.

—For us to be seen like that.

For Yuigahama to be seen amiably chatting with someone at the lowest denominator of the caste wasn't a feeling I could stomach at all. I didn't want her to go through that time during the fireworks festival again.

Anyway, it'd be nice if we could go home before the weather gets any worse...

With the terrible weather overheard, the other clubs were readying to leave early. *We can stay longer, but I doubt we'll see any more clients today*, I thought.

The door of the room then clattered open without warning.

"You guys are still here?" Hiratsuka-sensei, the adviser of the Service Club, entered the room, choosing not to knock like always. "The other clubs are already leaving. Head on home before the weather gets any worse."

Yukinoshita closed her book after listening. "Let's call it a day, shall we?"

The room was dark with the clouds looming low overhead. Pulling those shadows along made even Yukinoshita's face look dark.

"...Well, take care on your way back." Hiratsuka-sensei looked at Yukinoshita in consideration, but said nothing further and left.

Yuigahama and I didn't raise any objections, readied to go home, and left the room together.

"...I'll return the key before leaving." Yukinoshita left with those words, walking down the empty hallway.

I faced towards the entrance without seeing her off. Yuigahama was three steps behind me, slightly hesitant about what she should do herself.

We were speechless up until we changed our shoes.

Only the sounds of the loafers dropping echoed at the entrance. When I slipped on my loafers, I went straight outside.

"I'll be going home on my bike."

"Okay. Bye-bye." Yuigahama waved her hand in front of her chest and we exchanged our goodbyes.

The wind that contained the humidity from the south was awfully lukewarm.

× × ×

I desperately pedaled my bike through the headwind. The city bike which I abused for over a year now screamed. The pedaling sounds rippled atop the incessant noise.

No matter how much I pedaled, it felt like I wasn't making any progress. If anything, it was more like I was getting pushed from behind. My spirit was nearly going to break from the considerably, strong wind, but I desperately stepped down on my pedals.

Though the day may have gotten shorter, the sun should still be looming overhead. It's just that thick clouds were beginning to form as if to hide it away.

The staggering street lights unreliably lit the way, with the vinyl bag and empty cans jerking back and forth.

In the darkness, the smell of dirt mixed with the humidity wafted in the air with black spots emerging all over the asphalt.

The stains increased by one, and one. Raindrops continued to pour, accompanied by loud sounds.

Eventually, the black spots engulfed the entire ground.

The rain noisily fell and fell, paying no heed to me at all, dropping and dropping. It was at the point where my arms getting hit were in pain.

The rain droplets mercilessly pounded against my body, turning my dress shirt transparent. I couldn't help but be frustrated at the lack of high school girls in the area.

—*What a pain, what the heck is this...?* I whispered inside of my mouth and I pulled my umbrella from my bike.

I expanded the vinyl umbrella while shielding myself from the rain.

But in the next instant, the powerful wind picked up strength and destroyed the umbrella. The frame of the umbrella crumpled and the vinyl turned into a simple sail. The wind carried me along, right, like that of a yacht.

I lost my balance and frantically regained my footing.

...I was this close to falling over there.

I wiped off the cold sweat and the raindrops and folded the broken umbrella in resignation.

—*Really. What a pain.*

The wind that drowned out the surrounding noise and the torrential rain that you couldn't even squint in.

My drenched clothes sapped away the warmth of my body, subjecting me to the weight of the humidity. My vision was already obscure.

In this kind of rain, my tires, my words, and my thoughts started to slip away.

The Hanami River that stuck out from the cycling course continued to spew out black water, washing away all sorts of things.

But in the middle of the storm, the only thing it left behind was me.

Chapter 2

Sagami Minami strongly makes her appeal.

At any rate, school was probably going to be put on hold, what with the typhoon's interference.

There was a time when I had thought that.

But *dosukoi*, an entire night hadn't even passed and the typhoon went its way, everyday life taking back its rightful place in the morning.

And the result? DO-TEN P-KAN, the sky was painfully sunny, IPPAI OPPAI, I was full of energy.¹ Like hell I was.

I was confident I could go to school late, using the typhoon as an excuse, a scummy move, so I stayed up considerably late. And here I was, deprived of sleep. Heck, this lack of sleep could pass as an ending song for Kiteretsu².

The typhoons lately had been so feeble that it was causing problems for me.

I somehow managed to make it on time to school, but I was assaulted by drowsiness the entire day. Usually during breaks, I'd either sleep or pretend to, but I was especially sleepy today.

It wasn't only just during breaks. I was also battling with it during class. That's to say, I tried resting my chin in my hand, sprawling forward on my desk, and placing my head on my crossed arms, looking for an ideal sleeping position. Yeah, it's definitely that. Since fighting wasn't a nice thing to do, it's better to settle things peacefully, yep. I think I'll get along better with drowsiness from now on.

And before I knew it, class had ended.

The conclusion I had arrived at for the best sleeping position was falling prostrate on the desk with both arms interposed at my neck. This way I wouldn't leave any imprints on my face. The only problem was the dull pain in my neck, shoulders, and back.

Or so I said, but I couldn't even get a wink of sleep, and my lethargy reached its peak because I had an unnatural posture. I had the feeling I wouldn't be able to get a decent amount of shuteye unless I lay down.

It was obvious where I needed to go.

I stood up and walked to the back door of the classroom with unsteady steps.

It was that instant when I opened the door.

"Uwah!"

"Er, sorry."

We didn't make a *beep, bop, beep* ☆³ collision, but I did receive a light impact to my chest. I had bumped into someone who was just about to substitute my position in class. Hey, who the heck was this "person who had better not get a license for not watching where he was going of the year⁴?"

I scowled at the person with a sidelong look and gave my respects to his face. It was a small animal-like boy I was familiar with staggering on his feet, making him very cute. The one who had entered the room with short gasps was, "I really think you shouldn't get a license, instead, you should just sit in the passenger's seat with me while I drive my car... of the year!", Totsuka Saika.

"Oh, Hachiman. Sorry about that..."

"N-Nah! That was my fault. I was kind of out of it for a bit there..."

In fact, I was completely out of it right now. Though it might've been a coincidental side effect, right now, I was posed with Totsuka in my arms... Phew, that was close. Had there been bread in Totsuka's mouth, I would've fallen head over heels for him.

Totsuka realized that we were suspended in our position and gently took some distance from my chest. "Sorry again, I was kind of in a hurry... Hachiman, were you going somewhere? It's almost time for class, you know?"

"Nothing much." I answered.

I'm skipping class to sleep in the infirmary, but I couldn't really say that out loud. Boasting criminal behavior like that should be done on Twitter only.

Totsuka slightly tilted his head. "But wouldn't it be better to stay? We're going to decide on our duties for the Cultural Festival in the next class."

"Oh, really?"

The only thing we were able to decide on in long home room the other day was the theme. They were probably going to discuss in detail about how to proceed forward in the next hour.

"...Well, anything works for me."

It's not like I was going to do anything anyway. As always, I would just be present, an existence that served only to exist.

Once everyone started on preparations, the only thing I could do was act like a bizarre totem pole and stand still.

It didn't matter what job I was given, what I'd do wouldn't change.

I didn't have anything to do, but with the so-called preemptive style, I'd find myself standing behind someone, taking a peek at their hands, mumbling "uh huuuh" with a know-it-all face, and simply wait for them to tell me "could you do this for me?"

"It's fine if you just pick whatever's available for me."

I had no idea whether my thoughts had gotten across to Totsuka, but he nodded with a curious look. “Okay, got it.”

Thanks, I lightly waved my hand and left the room.

× × ×

While listening to the bells that signaled the start of class, I headed for the infirmary on the first floor of the special building.

I walked in the dead atmosphere, obviously with no students frolicking around given the time.

It was slightly relaxing around the infirmary. I lightly knocked on the door in front of me, and when I opened it, the smell of antiseptic solution drifted to my nose.

A female student was chatting with the school nurse inside. But the moment I entered, their talking abruptly stopped.

The female student whose name I didn’t know dropped her eyes to her cellphone in discomfort. It felt like I did something bad there. Sorry, tee-hee.

“Oh my, aren’t you one of Shizuka-chan’s kids?” The school nurse, a young woman wearing a white gown, said, looking at me closely.

I’m not sure what to think of being considered that. It’s almost like we’re parent and child or something, you know? Someone will get mad, okay? For the most part, Hiratsuka-sensei will. Especially regarding her age, that is.

“I think I have a cold.” I briefly explained my visit. Of course, I made sure to show how sluggish I was feeling too. Times like these were where I showcased my unrivaled acting skills. It wouldn’t be weird to call me a master of the cold. Oh gosh, that name sounds soooo cool. Still, using master and cold in one phrase made it sound way too chuuni.

“I wouldn’t trust an amateur’s judgment. Let me have a look.” Regardless, the school nurse casually brushed off my full-powered acting.

Tch, you couldn’t expect any less from the school nurse, a veteran at handling skipping students. Couldn’t you just have *pretended* to have fallen for my little performance!?

Sensei gave me an intent stare down, as if trying to look past my lie. No, it might be more accurate to say she was leering at me with sharp eyes instead. Had this been the world of Pokémon, my defense would have been lowered.

“...This is definitely a cold.”

“That’s a rather quick assessment...”

What the heck was that little charade from earlier then...? I sent her a gaze, both with objection and discontent.

Sensei laughed. “I mean, just look at those dull eyes of yours. There’s no way you’re not sick.”

She made it sound like I was afflicted with something around the clock. What exactly did she mean by “dull”, anyway? Even the dull London became Paris once the weather cleared up, you know? Tomorrow’s who-ja?[5](#)

Sensei looked at me with an “okay” after she finished writing something on her clipboard. “Well? Are you going to rest here?”

She asked casually, as if suggesting “do you want to equip here?”

“Ah, okay.”

“There’s a bed further in.” She gave a brief answer and I listened obediently. The bed, separated by the curtain, had a neatly folded linen blanket on top. I slid it over my stomach and lied down.

The chatter beyond the pink curtain started up once again. As I fell asleep, those hazy voices lingered in my ears.

× × ×

What... the hell...[6](#)

It was the end of break.

At some point before I made it back to class, I had been forced into the planning committee for the Cultural Festival.

On the blackboard was written “Hikigaya”. And it was under planning committee no less. Gwaaah! Dis’ some kinda conspiracy![7](#)

I mean, granted, I did say to toss me whatever position that was available. Regardless of what I’d be tasked to do, nothing would change, so I was ready to accept any kind of work no matter how mind-numbing it’d be.

But, but, even so, didn’t any of these guys feel any kind of of guilt from pushing a job onto someone because they didn’t want to do it?

Wasn’t it common sense at times like these to assign loners harmless jobs? As a matter of fact, that was always the case up until now.

The “we made you the committee chairman because you were resting (lol)” method was conceived primarily because the leaders of the class could get a kick out of it by forcing each other to do something hilarious, so if you imposed that onto an individual belonging to another cultural atmosphere...!

Then that was pretty much a war...! No count...! No count...![8](#)

I stood in front of the blackboard in dumb amazement until my shoulders were tapped.

“Do you need an explanation?” It was obvious who it was without turning around.

*Sh-She’s here~ the female teacher near thirty who can’t get married,
Hiratsuka Shizuka~*

I wordlessly looked at her for an explanation.

Hiratsuka-sensei briefly sighed and glanced at the clock. “It’s almost time for the next class, yet everyone was still dawdling around. That’s why I chose you Hikigaya.”

Hold it right there, Japanese teacher. You can’t be using “that’s why”. There’s no logical connection here.

“Sensei, what are you trying to pull...?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t give me that... Just what do you take loners for, sensei!? Forcing loners into things like class events only brings about tragedies, you know!”

These types of events were meant primarily for people who were friendly with each other to enjoy themselves in. If I was there, then they’d have to be considerate of me! Had I been given a worthless position, where my presence had absolutely no influence, then both parties could take it easy and do our own things in peace! While I may not advocate Ghandi’s nonviolent civil disobedience doctrine, I did support the nonintervention unnegotiable doctrine, you know!

“I was going to check with you on the matter, but... I believe you’re the one that said anything was fine though?”

Oooph... I thought, and let out a sigh. I turned towards the window side of the class and Totsuka clapped his hands together apologetically. Cute. Aah, join your palms together for bliss. Pray, pray.[2](#)

As I stood there distracted, the wrinkles at Hiratsuka-sensei’s brow inched closer and closer until it couldn’t anymore. Wriiiiinkles.

“Enough already, I can’t start class with you up here so get to your seat. Decide on the rest after school.”

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Class after school was chaotic.

We were going to decide on all the responsibilities for the Cultural Festival. This was supposed to have been done in the previous class, but it apparently took a long time just trying to pick out the male representative for the planning committee. Ultimately, Hiratsuka-sensei’s tyrannical judgment led to the role being pushed onto me. This was what they called power harassment... Argh! If only I had more power! Then I would’ve been able to pass it onto someone else! This series of power harassment... you couldn’t expect nothing less from this vertically structured society of Japan. It was this exact moment today that I truly felt the Japanese in me.

Now then, that’s how I was feeling, but we still had to choose the female representative for the planning committee.

At the teacher’s lectern was the class officer leading. I didn’t know his name. Everyone tended to call them class officers anyway. There was also demand for

girl class presidents too, but unfortunately, it was a boy, so class officer was sufficient.

“Erm, okay, if there’s any girl who wants to be a committee member, raise your hand,” said the class officer. No one responded and he briefly sighed in resignation. “If we can’t decide, we can go with rock-paper-scissors...”

“Haa?”

The class officer was cut off by Miura. He started to stutter, going “mmmng” out of fear. With just her destructive “haa” alone, she was able to silence the area around her. What temple was she brought up in? Being brought up in a temple sure is amazing. I couldn’t help but think that again.[10](#)

After that, sporadic chatter followed by silence looped. People would talk somewhere in class, and when the class officer touched on the matter, “how’s that?”, the silence would set right back in. This scenery played over and over.

“...Is it, like, a lot of work?” Yuigahama asked, seemingly unable to watch the situation any longer.

The class officer showed an obvious expression of relief. “I think if you just do it normally, it won’t be all that difficult... It might end up being pretty hard for the girl though.”

That damn four-eyes, he totally glanced in my direction when he said that. That damn four-eyes, he was totally indirectly telling me I’d be useless. But because he looked so shameful saying it, I ended up feeling apologetic before getting angry. It was my fault, four-eyes. Okay, okay, help yourself to the glasses.[11](#)

“Uh huuuh...” Yuigahama said, looking in my direction with slight anxiety.

The class officer went on the offense, interpreting her to be wavering, as if this was his only chance.

“Honestly, if you took up the mantle, Yuigahama-san, that’d be great. I think you’re really suitable, since you’re popular, so I’m sure you’ll be able to get everyone working together in no time.”

“No way, I’m not really...” Yuigahama answered, embarrassingly shaking her head[12](#), and a voice resembling the freezing temperature of ice, could be heard.

“Oooh, Yui-chan, you’re gonna do it, huuuh?”

“Eh?” Yuigahama turned and ahead of her was a female student.

Let’s see. I think she was Sagami?

Sagami was solidified in a group of four, sitting a distance away from Yuigahama and the others. Opposite of the window side, furthest back in the class, where Miura’s group resided was the hallway side, slightly farther in towards the classroom, where Sagami’s posse was located.

“Hey, that sounds sooo awesome too! Close people at an event sounds like a toootally cool party~,” Sagami said, and her nearby friends giggled with sardonic laughter.

With a vague smile, Yuigahama replied. “Well, that’s not really it.”

Sagami directed a meaningful look my way.

That smirk was disgustingly repulsive. The mingled snickers from the girls sitting nearby, even more so, were altogether grating.

Exactly what was inherent in those sneers? There was no way I couldn’t know.

They were the same things underneath the laughter that time, the day of the fireworks display.

To Yuigahama, who always belonged to the inner circle, and to me, who always belonged to the outer, those sneers were chock-full of scrutiny and scorn.

The laughter resembling ripples echoed deep within my ears.

“Hey, like,” said a voice, sounding pompous in nature, and cleaved the commotion apart. It was like the sudden halting of insect noises when stepping audaciously into a thicket. “Yui and I are going to get customers, so no way that’s possible.” Miura Yumiko asserted decisively and brazenly.

As if pressured by her intensity, Sagami and the others stuttered, and then went silent. Sagami’s smile continued to keep its shape. “Oh okaaay, getting customers is important too, yep.”

“Y-Yeah, yeah, getting customers is important, er, since when did we decide I’d be doing that!?” Yuigahama answered, conforming, but ended up surprised. I was pretty sure only the male representative for the planning committee was elected so far, though...

Yuigahama’s reaction caused Miura to get flustered in her own special way. “Eh...? Y-You’re not going to do it with me? W-Was I wrong? Was I totally jumping the gun there...?”

“No worries, Yumiko. You’re not too far off. That reaction of yours is what makes you Yumiko too!” Ebina-san replied, sticking her tongue out, and winked, followed by a thumbs-up. Yes, well, that really was something you’d see from Miura.

“Wha, Ebina, stop flattering me! You’re gonna make me embarrassed!”

Miura, I know you’re already completely red and hitting Ebina-san, but I don’t think that was a compliment, sorry.

On the side, Yuigahama’s shoulders were downfallen. “I-I guess I don’t have a say, huh...”

You finally noticed? But you should be relieved. I mean, I didn’t even have that right. Heck, not only did Hiratsuka-sensei decide things with her arbitrary

judgment, everyone clearly had some misgivings about it. I was seriously an unwanted child.

Seeing absolutely no progress, the class officer let out a short sigh. I could feel the grief coming from the middleman.

“In other words, how about something like this?” Hayama, who had been silently watching the entire time, started up without bothering to raise his hand. Everyone’s attention was naturally lured in. Even the class officer was looking at him with sparkling eyes of expectation. “We just have to ask someone who can show leadership, right?”

Hayama’s words were extremely reasonable and valid. True, it wouldn’t hurt to have leadership experience considering you’d be in charge of various responsibilities. Though, if there was one problem, then it’d be how he sounded like I had no leadership at all. Okay, sure, the only things I had were cold compresses¹³.

Still, in that case, then it became a discussion about how jobs like these should be left to those in the top caste. But since the male representative seat was already occupied by me, the girls were quickly declaring their lack of willingness to take up the role.

If we think about this from a general perspective, in the event where people from the top caste didn’t take up the responsibility, then it would fall in the hands of the next group down.

The implications of Hayama’s words were perceived exactly as that by Tobe.

“Sounds like Sagami-san, yeah?”

“Yeah, that might work. Sagami-san seems like she’d do a good job too.” Hayama looked convinced despite being the one who had come to that conclusion.

Tobe, in his own special way, looked proud, going “I know, right?” It was a little sad how cute he was trying to be.

On the other hand, Sagami, who was suddenly mentioned, shook her hands in front of her face. “Whaat? Meee? I dunno if I can. It’s, like, tootally impossible for me!” She may have been refusing, but there was no sincerity in it.

Hey, hey, as a leading expert in rejection, you can’t fool my eyes, you know? When a girl really rejected something, she’d say, “Um, could you stop please?”, with a near blank expression and extremely colder eyes. It’s so scary that you’d feel like your heart was going to stop and you’d want to die.

Grasping this standard of pre-established harmony, Hayama clapped his hands together, with an apologetic look for insurance. “Sagami-san, could I ask you to do it somehow?”

“... Well if no one else is going to do, then I guess I’ll have to. Buuuut, me, huh?” Sagami’s expression happily turned red, intentionally mumbling her words. What Jigoku no Something-sawa¹⁴ were you?

She probably wasn’t in a bad position since she was being asked by that Hayama, rather, “I’m getting relied on by *that* Hayama!”

“Okay, I gueeeess I’ll do it.” Sagami answered, looking reluctant.

The class officer breathed a sigh of reassurance on his glasses and said in exhaustion, “Okay, let’s end it here for today...”

Everyone then stood up and left the class.

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And so, the planning committee was going to begin as early as today.

The time was 3:45 in the afternoon. I reviewed the schedule in my head.

On campus, not only were you expected to adhere to isolation, but also to have the ability to manage yourself. Moving from class to class, holidays, and after school plans were, for the most part, everything you needed to have a solid understanding of. This was because no one would tell you these things. I was super good at looking up things related to the holidays in particular.

The time progressively neared. I started for the conference room where the committee meeting was planned to be held.

People heading to the conference room were sporadic in staggered groups. In the traffic of people, there were also boy and girl pairs talking on their way there. Good grief, could these kids lost in life not make it anywhere unless they had someone with them?

The conference room was allocated as the Cultural Festival planning committee meeting space. Its size was just about the size of two regular classrooms and gaudy seats and tables were prepared inside. It looked like it was typically used by staff members for meetings.

When I entered the conference room, about half so far had gathered.

She must’ve headed here before I did, because Sagami was there as well.

Grouped with two other girls, whom she was friends with the entire time, or gotten friendly in this short amount of time, Sagami was engrossed in conversation.

“Wow, I’m sooo glad you’re a member too, Yukko. I sorta got pushed into the position, so I was freaking out. ” Once Sagami got the ball rolling, the other two followed.

“I’m here because I lost at rock-paper-scissors.”

“Me tooooo! Oh, Sagami-san, can I call you Manami-chan?”

“Sure, sure. What should I call you?”

“Haruka’s fine.”

“Oh, Haruka? Aren’t you in the girls basketball club with Yukko?”

“Yep, yep.”

“Oooh, that sounds nice. Maybe I shoulda joined a club too. I totally have no luck with class, you see.”

“Ah, class F is the one with Miura-san right?”

“Uh huh.”

Sagami’s gloomy expression was scary, but the other two girls who brought up Miura’s name from just the phrase “no luck with class” were in a league of their own.

Standalone girl talk didn’t have any malice worth worrying about, but when they aggregated into something bigger, they became a deadly poison; that’s what made them dreadful. Just like how the accumulation of miniscule poisons from other living creatures in a blow fish was converted to tetrodotoxin, this was very similar.

“But hey, Hayama-kun’s there, so it’s not so bad.”

“Pretty much. Hayama-kun’s the one who actually recommended me to the committee too. I had no idea what to do then.”

Again, what Something-sawa were you? Sagamisawa-san?

I strained my ears and I could hear conversations coming from others besides Sagami and her friends.

As the number of people increased, those ripples of conversation transformed into noise.

The number of people in the room increased one by one as the beginning of the meeting approached. Whenever the door slid open, everyone would direct their attention towards it, but quickly look away upon realizing it wasn’t a friend. Those stares were really unpleasant... The way they’d look away nonchalantly was as if they were declaring, “I wasn’t waiting for someone like you, I have no interest in you.”

But when the next person came in, it was a far cry from that.

The instant the door opened, the boisterous chatter immediately ceased.

Walking through the abruptly set stillness, her footsteps hushed, was a girl, Yukinoshita Yukino. Her usual overbearing attitude was nowhere to be seen. Every single individual’s breathing had stopped, like that of gazing at thawing snow that continued to dissolve.

When Yukinoshita noticed me, she stopped for just a brief moment. But she quickly averted her gaze, and took a few steps, and even took a few more as if rethinking her decision and sat at the nearest seat to her.

It was only a short amount of time for her to arrive at her seat, but time in the conference room had definitely been frozen until then.

Although I should've been used to seeing her already, my eyes were still taken in by her for just that moment. Was it because this was the first time I had seen her outside of where we'd usually meet? Or was there was something surprising about her participation in this Cultural Festival planning committee?

Time was already moving. Though there were hints of restraint, reserved chatter started up again like a sea roar. Just a little longer and the hands of the clock would turn to the commencement of the meeting.

The door of the conference room opened once again, simultaneous to the sounds of footsteps and conversation.

It was a group of students with a sense of solidarity holding printouts. Entering after them was Atsugi, the physical education teacher, and Hiratsuka-sensei.

Why is Hiratsuka-sensei... I thought, finding it odd, and looked at her. When our eyes met, she smiled at me. That smiling face of hers made her appear younger than her actual age and cute.

In other words, there was some ill will underneath it.

I really did get suckered, didn't I...?

After several of the students gathered at the front of the conference room, they looked at the face of a single female student. And then, the soothing-looking female student returned a nod.

With that as a signal, two students, apparently first years, began distributing papers around to everyone. Confirming that the two made their rounds around the room, the female student gently stood up.

"Okay, let's start the Cultural Festival planning committee meeting."

Her medium length hair dropped down to her shoulders, her front bangs were clipped with a pin, and her slick and beautiful forehead radiated brilliantly. Her uniform was worn as per the school regulations, but the colorful hair band that was wrapped around the lapel badges and her wrist gave her a feeling of adorableness. That female student sweetly looked at everyone with narrowed eyes and a smile, and gave us a, somehow, soothing command. Everyone then sat up straight.

"Um, I'm the student council president, Shiromeguri Meguri. I'll be extremely happy if we can manage another Cultural Festival this year without issue by cooperating with each other... U-Um... S-So let's do our best, everyone! Yeah!" Meguri-senpai finished with a simple remark that made you think she was saying to "go get 'em!"

When she was done, the other student council members gradually gave round of applause. Lured in by that, the rest of the conference broke into claps as well.

Meguri-senpai nodded to that scenery. “Thank you~ In any case, let’s get to electing the planning committee chairman.”

The members present here grew noisy.

Well, right. I was completely under the impression the student council president was going to assume the position of chairman myself.

Meguri-senpai made a strained smile. “I’m sure there are a lot of people who know this already, but every year, a second year is usually chosen as the planning committee chairman. And see, I’m already a third year.”

Haa, I see. Well, third years couldn’t really be doing these things at the beginning of fall. They were going to be test taking students soon after all.

“Okay, is there anyone who wants to try for the position?” Meguri-senpai asked, but no one raised their hand.

It was understandable. I doubt the students lacked motivation for the Cultural Festival. There were probably quite a lot of them working their butts off in high spirits too.

It’s just that wanting to show off, wanting to participate actively, and wanting to try their best were different scopes altogether.

If there was something they could do, then it was more natural for them to want to do it with their class or club. What they really wanted was working together with people they were friends with, enjoying a festival with that one girl they were taken with.



In fact, it was more of an issue of how they should do their best in a group of misfits.

“Is there aaaanyone at all?” Meguri-senpai’s voice sounded perplexed, but the conference continued to maintain its silence.

The physical education teacher Atsugi cleared his throat like he was screaming a war cry. “Oh, what the heck is this? You guys need to show more motivation. You guys aren’t ambitious enough. Listen here, this Cultural Festival is an event meant for all of you.”

It was a zeal that made you think he was going to end his sentences with “damn, right it is!”

It looked like Atsugi was acting as an advisor for the Cultural Festival. Hiratsuka-sensei, who was crossing her arms beside him, was on the same boat.

Atsugi surveyed the conference room and he eyed each person one by one.

That immodest gaze stopped at Yukinoshita.

“...Oh. Aren’t you Yukinoshita’s little sister!? I sure hope we can expect a Cultural Festival like last time, eh?”

It was implicit. Buried under his words and what could be interpreted was “Of course, you’ll be the chairman, right?”

Meguri-senpai seemed to have noticed as well and whispered, “Ah, so that’s Haru-san’s little sister.”

I expected nothing less from Yukinoshita Haruno. She had left a long-lasting impression on both her teachers and juniors here.

“I’ll do my utmost as a committee member.” Yukinoshita answered succinctly, but politely. The slight twitch in her eyebrows looked like she was put into a bad mood.

Taking that cold rejection, Atsugi reluctantly answered with lukewarm “oh” and “right” answers and then went quiet.

When that happened, even Meguri-senpai was at a loss. She crossed her arms in exaggeration and went into thought. “Hmm... oh, I know. There are benefits to being the chairman, you know? Like, it’ll show up on your transcript. For those aiming for a school recommendation, I think there are plenty of merits to it.”

Is she an idiot...?

Did she really expect someone to volunteer with that kind of explanation...? Besides, someone who became the chairman with that objective in mind would be too transparent.

“Ummm... So how does that sound?” Meguri-senpai said, directing her gaze towards Yukinoshita.

Whether she realized it or not, Yukinoshita remained unresponsive, continuing to look in Meguri-senpai's direction.

She was someone who didn't like to stand before people in public. Committee chairman just didn't fit with her character.

Nevertheless, having Meguri-senpai focusing on her with a smile, even Yukinoshita was starting to feel uncomfortable and squirmed a little.

It was a pure smile, permeated with heavy pressure, and even her innocent gaze contained no elements of dishonesty to it.

Just a little longer and Yukinoshita would probably break...

But it was the exact moment when Yukinoshita gave in and heavily sighed.

"Um..."

The atmosphere stricken with a strange tension immediately relieved itself. What broke the silence was a timid voice.

"If no one wants to do it, then, I don't mind doing it."

The origin of the voice was three seats away from me. It was Sagami Manami's.

Meguri-senpai, who heard the proposition, clapped her hands happily. "Really? Yay! Okay, could you introduce yourself?"

Urged on, Sagami adjusted her breathing. "I'm Sagami Minami from class 2-F. I'm a little interested in stuff like this... And, like, I want to grow through this Cultural Festival or something... I'm not too good at putting myself out there, but you know how it is, 'what the heck am I saying, then just don't do it' or something, right! Ah, but, that's the thing I want to change about myself. How should I say it? It's sort of like a chance to skill up, so I want to try my best."

...*Why in heaven's name do I need to help you grow?* I thought, but the others looked like they didn't have any qualms about it.

"Uh huh, that sounds great to me. That's important too. Stepping up, that is."

Sparse claps arose, and the room continued with sporadic applause throughout the class.

Sagami bowed her head, looking slightly embarrassed, and took her seat.

Overjoyed from being able to settle on a candidate, Meguri-senpai murmured "yay!" in a small voice, swiped the pen from the secretary, and wrote on the blackboard "Planning Committee Chairman: Sagami". Um, it's not like you're E. Honda¹⁵ or anything...

Meguri-senpai tossed the pen back to the secretary, and turned around as she swished her skirt. "Okay, what's left is deciding on responsibilities. The minutes have a simple explanation on them so please read them. In five minutes, we'll proceed with taking hands for who wants to do what."

As we were instructed, I looked at the minutes that were distributed to me.

Public advertising, volunteer management, item management, health division, finance accountant, assistant historian... This was kind of bloated.

That being said, a high school Cultural Festival shouldn't be all that complicated up to a certain extent.

My little sister, Komachi, was working in the student council, but it didn't seem all that strenuous. In the end, this was nothing but a school event. All we had to do was just steadily tread along the laid out rails. Stand By Me.[16](#)

I scanned over the minutes. Which one of these had the least work?

Public advertising. Well, I didn't need to read the description for this. It was basically something like sticking up posters on the windows of a convenience store. But that meant designing the poster and negotiating. The only future I could see was getting laughed at. Pass.

Volunteer management. The volunteer group; in other words, you had to deal with people taking part in the band and dance. Impossible. I thought far and wide, but it ultimately boiled down to dealing with individuals belonging to the top caste. If it was a financing agency, then I would've signed up. No chance.

Item management. This was basically renting out desks from various classes and managing transportation of technology. Transporting sounds pretty hard and seems super tiring. Though if it's just going *untan♪untan♪* with castanets[17](#), then I wasn't opposed to that. Let's ignore this one.

Health division. Ah, this was probably one of those jobs where you had to collect food commodity applications and stuff. It might've worked out if it was physical health. I'll refrain from this.

Finance accountant. Yeah, yeah, handling money related stuff, right? Nope, there's no way I'd be able to take responsibility for any problems that sprung up, so that would be a lot of trouble. The last thing I'd want is to be strapped for cash and hung out to dry. I decline positively.

...Really, just now, even I thought I was pushing it a bit.

So the only job that might be doable for me was the assistant historian. Just a quick skim of the description and it apparently involved taking pictures on the day of the event. It's not like I had anything booked for that day anyway. It should be pretty good for killing time.

After arriving at that conclusion, I did a light stretch.

I also looked around and people were either playing with their phones or talking to each other, meaning they, for the most part, had made their decision.

There was an especially loud voice in that group, nearby even.

"I became the chairman in the heat of the moment, oh gosh, what am I gonna do~!"

“It’s okay! Sagami-san, you can tootally do it.”

“I wonder, can I reaaaally? Like, I totally said some super embarrassing stuff earlier. There’s no way I can, right?”

“That’s not true, heck, it’s a good thing. Besides, we’ll help you out too.”

When she started the conversation with “right”, the two other girls responded in agreement.

“Yeah, yeah!”

“Reaaaally? Thank yooou!”

I could hear that heart-warming exchange. Amazing. It was like the beautiful friendship you’d see before the start of a marathon.

...It felt like I’ve seen that exchange somewhere earlier. What the heck? Was this déjà vu? Or maybe it was copy-and-paste? Still, even if it wasn’t, those kinds of people *always* talked like that every time. The topic and vocabulary might be different, but at the very end, they’d just finish with compliments to each other, or something. Looks like fun.

“Are we about ready now?”

Meguri-senpai’s voice was surprisingly easy to hear. Maybe because it was soothing, fluffy, or *wannyaka papa yunpappa*¹⁸, but it’s because of that that it easily lingered at the corners of my consciousness.

Unlike how you stood up from someone shouting and screaming at you, everyone’s face peacefully and naturally shifted in senpai’s direction. It’s likely that this wasn’t her ability, but the natural disposition of her character.

“I suppose everyone’s got an idea of what you’d want to do. Okay, Sagami-san, the rest is up to you.”

“Eh, me?”

“Uh huh, I think the rest is where the chairman should take charge.”

“Yes...”

Senpai motioned Sagami to come her way. Sagami sat in the heart of the student council group.

“O-Okay, we’ll be deciding now...”

Her disappearing voice could be heard properly even in this quiet class.

Except, this silence was the kind which lacked a sense of stability.

It was a keen stillness that criticized foreign irregularities.

It was an unpleasant, poignant silence that treaded a fine line between transforming into a storm of curses and vile and not, should somebody burst into laughter inappropriately.

Sagami, who was having fun chatting earlier, was a shell of her former self.

Her voice that started up was feeble.

“...First, is... people who want to do public advertising...”

The gradually shriveling voice saw no hands.

“Okay, advertising PR it is. It’s advertising, you know? You can go to a lot of places, maybe even on television or on the radio, you know?”

Meguri-senpai’s soliciting words caused my heart to shake for just an instant. When you say television in Chiba, then you think of Chiba TV, and when you say radio, then you think of Bay FM. If they played that famous song, “Fight! Fight! Chiba!”, on Chiba TV and claimed you could meet Jaguar¹⁹ then, I would’ve jumped on the opportunity without a moment’s notice.

But I probably wouldn’t get to meet Jaguar so I held in the urge. By the way, this wasn’t referring to the Jaguar of Pyuu to Fuku!²⁰, but the hero of Chiba.

I wasn’t sure if Meguri-senpai’s bizarre follow-up worked or not, but her assist finally evoked some movement from the group. Numerous hands were raised and after settling on the number of volunteers, they moved on to the next responsibility.

“O-Okay... Next is volunteer management.”

A considerable amount of hands shot up, as if volunteering was the main component of the Cultural Festival. It was a number surpassing expectations as well.

“Eh, eh...” Sagami was at a loss.

Meguri-senpai supported her. “So many! There’s so many of you! Rock-paper-scissors for it!”

A sparkling display of motivation and *pika pika pikarin*²¹ lit up her forehead, and thus began the Megu Megu rock-paper-scissors.

× × ×

Meguri-senpai resolved one situation after the other with inexplicable, but unique enthusiasm. Whether it was due to the numerous experiences she had gone through or her natural-born disposition, she steadily managed the situation even in the chaos.

Roles were distributed in that fashion the entire time. That was the student council president for you, despite looking unreliable at first glance. With Meguri-senpai’s ability, the allocation of jobs was appropriated properly.

By the way, I was able to lock in my position as an “assistant historian”.

Whether it was the fault of the order in which this “assistant historian” position was appropriated, or due to the gathering of same-minded individuals as me, the situation had transformed into a graveyard of assertiveness.

All the groups in charge of different responsibilities broke into groups for introductions, but they were incredibly hard to watch.

“Um, what should we do?”

“Introduce ourselves, I guess?”

“Should we do it?”

“Yes.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Um, so who first?”

“Ah, I’ll start.”

It went like that. There were only seldom conversations resembling along the lines of “hey you, even barbers wouldn’t have that kind of hair”.

As a matter of course, Yukinoshita was in this group as well.

After we introduced ourselves with just our class and full name, it was time for the long-awaited rock-paper-scissors to decide the leaders of the various groups.

The “person who loses will do it” rock-paper-scissors we played had a different implication than the one the volunteer group had just moments ago.

First, it started off with deciding whether to go with rock or not, and then rock-paper-scissors after a dispute. A third year senpai by the name of Something-san was chosen as the group leader and quickly dismissed the group.

“Have a nice day.”

After repetitive, polite farewells, everyone gradually dispersed. Yukinoshita was the first to leave. I tried to get on board with the flow and leave the conference room, but it was that moment.

At the corner of the conference room was Sagami Minami, sitting in dejection. Was she depressed over her first job as the planning committee chairman didn’t go as well as she had hoped? Next to her were the two other girls she had been with, and for some reason, Hiratsuka-sensei and Meguri-senpai were present as well. It looked like they were planning to discuss what’s going to happen from here on.

The moment I had passed them, my eyes instantly met with Hiratsuka-sensei’s.

She sent me a *sparkle* ☆ wink and waved her hand at me, indicating nothing but “bye-byeeee”.

...Let’s go home quick.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.



相模 南
minami sagami

Birthday

June 26

Skills

Nothing in particular

Hobbies

Nothing in particular

**How you spend
your days off**

Part-time job at the neighborhood convenience store,
shopping

Chapter 3

As expected, Ebina Hina's musical is rotten. 2

The school building, the Cultural Festival nearing in under barely a month, was in a state of hysteria.

As of today, permission to remain after school for the Cultural Festival preparations was given. In the other classes, people were carrying cardboard back and forth, preparing art equipment and the like while the impatient guys started their merrymaking, running around with snacks and drinks in arm, barking “snacks!”

In the same way, class 2-F was making strides towards the Cultural Festival.

Hayama stood at the teacher's lectern and called everyone to attention. “Okay, let's pick out the staff and cast... For the screenwriter, we'll go with Hina, and the others...” He wrote down the jobs that might be deemed necessary on the blackboard.

The outcome:

Director – Ebina Hina

Producer – Ebina Hina

Screenwriter – Ebina Hina

And so, the dream staff had been assembled. Not to say there was anyone else who could do those jobs... whether it was an executive producer or a super producer...

Supplementing this creative front was:

Production Assistant – Yuigahama Yui

Advertising – Miura Yumiko

Important staff members were nominated along the way. With the lack of female roles in the production, it was very reasonable to expect these types of jobs to be handled by the girls.

But, the real problem was what came after.

A play meant actors, and on top of that, they had to be mostly males. In fact, it was essentially an all-male cast. It was “The Little Prince” ~*Thump! Boys All Over~*¹.

At first, they were open-minded, checking for individuals who were willing to take part in the play, but that was met with no responses. Well, that wasn't surprising since there was no way anyone would want to volunteer in a play like *that*.

“Uhhh, everyone, you don’t need to worry too much about the character sheets from last time, alright? We’re obviously not going to go with that.” Though Hayama tried to gloss it over, he wasn’t able to erase the image associated with the play, and a bizarre silence hung over the boys.

“Guess we’ll have to do this then...” The girl said, polishing her glasses with a rotten boldness, and she climbed onto the platform.

The one in possession of the casting ballot of Hell was Ebina Hina.

Ignoring the commotion in the class, she jotted down the official names of the roles. It looked like she was taking full advantage of her authority as the head of the production.

First, she filled in the roles for the minor characters.

Under the rose, the king, and the vain man, Ebina-san scraped the chalk against the board, writing down names.

“Nooooooo!” “Anything but the geographer!” “My Matterhorn is!”

Every name she wrote, an agonizing death scream erupted accordingly. The drawing of Hell depicting pandemonium was being produced before us.

Next, it was time for the announcement of the main cast.

The Little Prince: Hayama

Hayama froze. His face was somewhat pale as well. The girls, however, were heard shrieking in arousal from all over the class. Well, it was the main role after all, so utilizing an individual who could attract customers was the proper choice.

With that, one main role remained...

I looked at Ebina-san’s hands and the white lines formed into letters that I was all too familiar with.

The Narrator: Hikigaya

“...No, not happening.” My words slipped out the moment those letters were imprinted in my eyes.

The sharp-eared Ebina-san made a dumbfounded look. “Eh!? But Hayama x Hikitani fanzines are totally must-buy, you know!? Like, must-gay even!”

What in the world is this person saying...?

“The little prince cunningly dominates the sulking pilot with his words filled with pure warmth, and *that* is the charm of this work!”

Not from what I’ve heard. You’re going to piss off a Frenchman, you know.

“No... I *am* in the planning committee, so...”

“Y-Yeah, that’s true. Hikitani-kun’s already acting as our representative for the planning committee. Since we’ll need to do rehearsals and the like, it’s not very reasonable.”

Nice follow-up, Hayama.

“Oh... That’s a bummer.”

“Right, so, why don’t we think over the entire thing again...? Like the role of the little prince for example.”

So that’s what he was aiming for, huh? But before Hayama could finish, Ebina-san rewrote what was on the board.

The Little Prince: Totsuka

The Narrator: Hayama

“The sulky feeling might not be as strong, but I guess this works...”

“So I’m stuck doing the play regardless, huh...” said Hayama, his shoulders going limp.

“Oh, that sulkiness, that’s sooo good~” Ebina sent him a thumbs-up with her index finger telling him “good job!”

I didn’t really give a damn about Hayama, but Totsuka starring as the little prince was an excellent casting. He’s also very close to the image of “The Little Prince”. It’s just that the person in question looked confused. He probably wasn’t expecting to get chosen for the role.

“This seems pretty hard... Am I really good enough?”

“Yeah, I think it fits you.”

Ebina-san had quite the eye to choose him, though my eyes had turned rotten for another reason altogether...

“I see... There’s a bunch of stuff I don’t really get, so I need to look them up...”

“I think you’ll be fine without having to. Heck, it’s probably easier to understand if you just read the original instead. *That* plot she wrote is a really *bad* misinterpretation”

While it’s good to be earnest, there were a plethora of things in the world that you were better off not knowing. If, in the likelihood Totsuka was enlightened to that path after doing his research, I, too, would be unable to discard the possibility that I would be awakened to something as well, so by any means, I wanted to stop that from happening.

“Have you read it before, Hachiman?”

“... Yeah.”

It wasn’t a story I had particularly disliked. If I had to say, it was the kind I liked. But there were just some incomprehensible points in it that I couldn’t find myself to openly praise it. It was a piece that I had trouble putting my finger on.

“I can lend it to you if you want a go at it.”

“Really? Thanks!” Totsuka expressed a smile like the sudden blossoming of flowers. *I’m so glad my hobby is reading...* It was the first time I had thought this since I was born.

As we conversed, Totsuka was summoned to a meeting with the cast.

“Okay, I’ll be going over there, Hachiman.”

“Right on.” I saw him off and looked around the class.

In the vicinity, aside from the cast meeting, there were also other ones already involving the costumes, discussions regarding the advertising plans, as well as the funeral ceremony for the casts being initiated all over.

I left the class while watching with a sidelong glance. Noisy footsteps chased after me from behind. I knew who they belonged to even if I didn’t turn around. The only two people you could identify from just footsteps alone were basically Tara-chan² and Yuigahama.

“Hikki, are you going to club?” She called me from behind.

I relaxed my pace and answered. “Yeah, there’s still some time before the committee meeting. I also wanted to give her notice that I won’t be able to attend club for a while.”

“I see, that makes sense... I’ll go too.” Yuigahama said, standing next to me.

I glanced at her with a side look. “What about your work?”

“It’s okay. I think I’ll get busy once we actually get started on the play.”

That so, I answered briefly and walked down the hallway to the clubroom.

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Since the planning committee meeting was regularly scheduled at four in the afternoon, there was some spare time until then.

For someone like me who had not been entrusted with any kind of responsibility, I would only serve as a nuisance had I remained in class. Add to the fact that since I had been appointed to the planning committee, I could only offer haphazard assistance at best. If that happened, in the event where I had to leave and pass on the remaining workload to someone else, that would take effort and problems would happen. That’s why it was better to not just stick my hands in anything from the start. In this world, there were many things where not working led to profits.

...If they had forced me into the planning committee because they anticipated that, then the only thing I could say was “that makes sense”. In a contrary sense, the people who understood me the most might’ve been my classmates.

An untouchable existence. Thinking about it like that made it sound kind of cool.

At Sobu High, clubs could only exhibit one activity. For example, the orchestra club would perform a concert, or the tea ceremony club would hold a tea party.

People fundamentally participated in the festival for class credit. Otherwise, it was under the guise of “volunteering”.

The *bang bong* noises since earlier were likely coming from the practice the volunteer band was engaged in. Guitars, which were only cool at this moment, were rocked with gusto, blaring with the energy of the Pocasukajan³, and the bass was plucked with the noises going *pom poko pom poko* as if there was an imminent Tanuki War⁴ upon us.

But that continued only in between the main building and the annex.

The corridor which stretched to the special building was the only location sustaining its silence in this commotion.

I could feel the temperatures drop one or two degrees, possibly due to the hallway being in the shade.

The club room was already unlocked. I could sense a chill coming from inside as if it was a hallucination crawling out.

When I slid the door open, Yukinoshita was there, no different from the norm.

“Yahallo!” greeted Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita slowly lifted her face, looked at the door as if it was bright, and reluctantly opened her mouth. “...Hello.”

“Yo.”

We exchanged our typical greetings, and went to our seats after answering appropriately.

“So you’re in the planning committee too, huh?”

“Eh? Really?”

“Yes...” Yukinoshita replied succinctly without removing her eyes from her book that she was holding.

“It’s kind of surprising to see Yukinon doing something like that.”

“Is that so...? Well, I suppose so...”

She wasn’t the type to stand in front of people. The Yukinoshita that I knew wasn’t someone who didn’t have the assertiveness, but rather, she was someone who didn’t like to stand out.

“If anything, I find it more surprising to see *you* on the planning committee.”

“Ah, I know, right? It totally doesn’t fit him.”

“Hey... I was forced into it in the middle... Well, if it means not having to participate in *that* musical, then doing some grunt work isn’t all that bad in comparison. All is well in the end.”

“That reason is very like you.”

“I can’t say the same for you though.”

Embedded in those words were prickling thorns.

They weren’t directed at Yukinoshita. They were thorns directed at myself. Again, I became aware of how I was forcing my image on other people, making me feel disgusted.

“.....”

“.....”

Yukinoshita completely ignored my words and her gaze didn’t move from her book at all. It was a silence where even time had coagulated.

Only the antiquated clock hung on wall cut through time and the sound of the ticking hands were aggravating to the ears.

Yuigahama let out a deep breath and looked at the clock. “Umm... you have a committee meeting today too, right? The thing is, I actually need to show up to class discussions...”

I picked up the words that she was likely going to continue with. “Yeah, that’s right. I’ll be busy with the committee too, so I won’t be able to show up to club for a while.”

Or possibly, “I won’t show up” might be more accurate.

Yukinoshita closed her eyes as if reflecting on that and shut her book. Afterwards, for the first time today, she looked this way. “...Good timing. I wanted to talk about that today too. For now, I was thinking of suspending the club until the end of the Cultural Festival.”

“Well, sounds about right.”

“...Mmm, okay, that makes sense. It’s the Cultural Festival and all, so it might be better that way.” Yuigahama contemplated for just a little, but she spoke, looking convinced.

“Alright, guess we’re done for today then.”

“...Right. Hikki, make sure to help out with class whenever you have free time too.” Yuigahama said.

I thought for a moment. On top of my duties as a committee member, if I had to do spend effort on what my class was exhibiting as well, it was definitely going to be a hassle. Unlimited Double Works...

“...Only if I get the time... Alright, I need to head out.” I gave a response synonymous with “I definitely won’t” to Yuigahama, and stood up with my bag in hand. Even my incredibly light bag felt totally heavy to me.

...Noo, I don’t want to go.

Just what was this feeling? Was it really this painful having to go to work? My stomach was somehow starting to churn inside out. Was it because of that? Now that my mind had surpassed my physical body’s limitations, my convictions were affecting reality itself. What a frightening Marble Phantasm⁵.

Well, you know, it was work, so I was still going to do it though.

But a sigh came out. I mean, I don’t want to work after all.⁶

Just as I was about to grab the door, there were knocks on it. When I strained my ears to the noise, I could hear the sound of giggling on the other side.

“Come in.” Yukinoshita answered and the door meekly slid open. The laughter that sounded like the rustling of leaves grew even louder.

“Excuuuuse us.”

The one who had entered the room was a female student that I knew.

Sagami Minami. She was in the same class, a member of the same Cultural Festival planning committee as me, and also its chairman.

Waiting behind her were two other girls. They were all wearing similar thin smiles.

Sagami’s eyes narrowed after looking at us. “Oh, it’s Yukinoshita-san and Yui-chan.”

Whoa there, I don’t suppose you’re forgetting one more individual here? You know, the guy that’s in your class and also in the same planning committee?

“Sagamin? What’s wrong?” Yuigahama looked at that female student with an inquisitive face.

Without answering her question, Sagami spun around, surveying the rest of interior of the room. “Oooh~ so the Service Club is Yukinoshita-san’s and you two’s club huh?” Her eyes swam around the room, alternating between me and Yuigahama.

I felt a slight sense of dread. Her eyes concealed a slyness of a snake. It gave rise to a strange and unpleasant feeling like how your pupils would contract to a vertical slit.

“What business do you have here?” Yukinoshita asked, using her typical harsh tone, even though it was with people she didn’t know very well. But somehow, it seemed much colder than it usually seemed.

“Ah... I’m sorry, for suddenly showing up here,” said Sagami, adjusting her etiquette while slightly fidgeting. “I’m, actually here for a consultation...” Without

directly meeting Yukinoshita's gaze, Sagami exchanged glances with her friends to the side and continued further. "Like, I'm kinda the committee chairman now, but I'm not super confident about it, you see... So, I'd like your help."

I wonder if this was what she was talking to Hiratsuka-sensei about after the meeting yesterday. So that's why, again, she referred someone who looked like he or she would have problems to this Service Club.

Well, I had an idea of what she was trying to say. Anyone would feel intimidated in the face of a job entrusted with a lot of responsibility, especially if it was their first time. And from what I had seen of Sagami in class, she wasn't the type to assertively try for a job like that.

But it begged the question as to whether Sagami was really someone who needed help.

Yukinoshita shifted her gaze towards Sagami, taking a moment to think in silence. Because Yukinoshita was watching her quietly, Sagami averted her eyes out of discomfort.

"...I believe this goes against your goal of wanting to grow, no?"

As Yukinoshita stated, Sagami was the one who willingly ran for candidate, stating she would accept the hardships for the sake of her own growth, and in turn, was named as the committee chairman.

Sagami stammered for an instant, but the complexion on her face persevered, displaying the same thin smile again. "Suuure, but, like, I really don't want to be a bother to everyone, and failing isn't exactly good either, right? And besides, I think cooperation with others is a part of my own growth too, so that stuff is important."

Yukinoshita just sat there, wordlessly listening to the voice that went on and on without pause.

"And like, I'm also a part of my class, so I totally want to help out there too. I'll feel suuuper sorry if I have to say I can't at all. Riiight?" said Sagami, and she faced Yuigahama.

"...Yeah, I guess so." Though Yuigahama had paused for just a tiny bit as if she was thinking about something, she agreed with Sagami.

"Oh, me too. I'm the type that likes to work with others anyway..."

"I know~ Like, I definitely want to get on better terms with people through this event, so we have to make this a success, right!"

The other two girls nodded their heads with "I know, right?" to Sagami's words.

But, Yuigahama had a slightly sullen face.

Her feelings were understandable. When all was said and done, what Sagami was doing was requesting Yukinoshita to clean up her mess for getting carried away.

This wasn't any more different than the time when Zaimokuza wished curses upon a group of folks called the game club after going berserk on the internet.

What Sagami was deeming important wasn't the experience and knowledge gained as the "Cultural Festival planning committee chairman", but the title itself. If she had truly wanted to act as a proper chairman, then what she should be doing was requesting help from insiders, not outsiders. For example, Meguri-senpai was proficient at getting the cooperation of everyone in that inner circle. She may appear somewhat unreliable, but she was able to solidify the student council and its members, possibly due to her personality, and even appeared as a competent student organization. Though, there was also the possibility that her unreliable and feeble conduct might've been the reason for that unity to come about.

But Sagami was different. It was because she was ashamed of showing her shortcomings, no, it was because she wanted to pretend to be brave that she sought the assistance of outsiders; that's how I saw it.

That was something that didn't vary too much from Zaimokuza some time ago.

Unfortunately for her, that kind of clean-up work was something we would refuse. It was about time for everyone to come to grips with the fact that getting carried away and bringing out your courage usually never turned into anything worthwhile.

It was only when you made wretched memories, regretted it, and admonished yourselves to never repeat that same mistake again that you could call it growth.

With that in mind, it would do us some good to refuse Sagami's request here.

In fact, considering it's *her* we're talking about, then we shouldn't be extending helping hands so easily. I'd rather not have my workload increase either.

Concerned about Yukinoshita who had been silent since earlier, Sagami glanced at her with a downcast look.

Noticing she was waiting for her to answer, Yukinoshita slowly opened her mouth as if she was putting together her thoughts and confirming them. "...So if I sum things up, it should be fine as long you have an aide, correct?"

"Yep, right, right."

Sagami brightly nodded, having finally been understood, but Yukinoshita's expression continued to stay cold.

"I see... I don't mind then. I'm in the planning committee as well so as long it doesn't go farther than that, I can assist you."

"Really!? Thank yooooou!" Sagami clapped her apparent happiness together in her hands and took two to three steps closer to Yukinoshita.

In contrast to her was Yuigahama. She looked at Yukinoshita with a gaze with slight surprise.

Honestly, it was unexpected to me too. I had completely thought these kinds of requests were the types we should avoid.

“Okay, thanks for the help!” Sagami said, looking somewhat excited, and left the room with her two accompanying friends. Only the three of us remained in the room and the mood became slightly heavier.

When I tried to leave the room again, it was that moment.

Yuigahama stood before Yukinoshita, looking resolved. “...Weren’t you going to stop the club?”

Her tone was much more severe than normal. Having noticed that, Yukinoshita’s shoulders twitched, and though she lifted her face for just an instant, she quickly looked away.

“...It’s something I’m doing personally. It’s not something you two need to worry about.”

“But if it’s like before—”

“It *is* like before... It’s not all that much different.”

Tenaciously taking her ground, Yuigahama’s words were cut off by Yukinoshita. Realizing that her will wasn’t going to budge, Yuigahama let out a thin sigh as if she had given up.

“...We should at least do it together—”

“That’s fine. If it’s regarding like the Cultural Festival planning committee meetings, then I have a decent understanding of it. It’s more efficient if I do it by myself.”

“‘Efficient’... Maybe, but even so...” Yuigahama mumbled her words.

Yukinoshita sent her cold gaze to the front cover of her book. She was indicating that she wasn’t going to speak any further about this matter.

For the two of us who had saw first-hand Yukinoshita Yukino’s excellence, we knew all too well. In reality, she could probably work something out even if she had been alone.

“...But I still think it’s weird,” said Yuigahama, and she turned her back. No voice called to that back of hers. “...I’m going back to class.”

Yuigahama walked off. I was standing dumbfounded as I watched their series of exchanges, but once I came to, I readjusted my bag, and left the club room after Yuigahama.

When I closed the door, I turned around.

The only person sitting in the club room was just Yukinoshita herself.

It was a sight so frighteningly beautiful, yet extremely melancholic, as if it pictured the light of the sun shining upon the ruins from the aftermath of a destroyed world.

× × ×

The loafers walloped against the linoleum floor.

Contrary to their sluggish appearance, those legs rigidly shot out.

“It’s like! It’s like! It’s like, really!!”

“Hey, wait up, calm down.” I said and stopped Yuigahama who was walking ahead of me.

The stomping noises of the floor stopped and she turned around along with the sound of squeaking. “What?”

She was clearly upset evident by her sulking and pouting expression. As I thought about how rare it was for her to make this kind of look, “What’s with you so suddenly?”

“I don’t know! It’s just like... Uuugh.”

Stop with the moaning. Are you a dog or something?

Yuigahama pounded the floor with her feet in frustration. After sorting out her feelings, she uttered her words little by little. “It’s like... it’s different how it usually is... I mean, the usual Yukinon, isn’t like that at all.”

“Well, I guess so...”

“Hikki too.” Yuigahama said with a voice as if struck with a dagger.

“.....”

I understood that myself. I was trying as much as I could do conduct myself in the same way as always. But it was always different just from the fact I was conscious of it. When I became aware of that, I would try to adjust myself which only served to make me even clumsier. I was completely entrapped in a spiral.

I guess that’s something you can understand just from looking, huh?

Either taking my silence as a confirmation of her words or that I was reflecting on it, Yuigahama didn’t hound me any further. I was slightly grateful for that.

“And also...”

As I waited for her to continue her words, Yuigahama distorted her body looking reluctant to speak. “...Hey. I want to talk about something unpleasant, do you mind?”

“Huh?” I responded with a lukewarm reply, confused as to what she had wanted to say.

Yuigahama looked up from the floor uneasily and asked again. “...You won’t hate me, right?”

“Can’t promise you that.”

“Eh, what to do...” Yuigahama stopped her movements and froze in place.

She was either an idiot in the first place or something else, but it's not like she was someone who only showed her pretty side. Suddenly displaying the calculative nature of girls here wasn't something I could deal with.

That being said, at this rate, the conversation wasn't going to head anywhere. I had the feeling nothing would change regardless of what she brought up here anyway. I scratched my head in an attempt to fill up the silence that came about.

"...Haa, it's fine. I've already come this far hating most people, so one thing here and there won't make me hate you so easily."

"Your reason's kind of sad..."

I took a gaze of serious sympathy...

"Whatever, it's fine. So, what's this unpleasant talk about?" I urged her on.

Yuigahama took a deep breath and opened her mouth. "Right... Um, you see, I'm not very good, with Sagamin."

"Really. *So*, what's the unpleasant talk about?"

"Th-That was the unpleasant talk just now..."

"Haa?" I blinked out of reflex like a Furby². Pet me, pet meeee!

"Eh, what? So what's unpleasant about it?"

"Um, you know, like how you can't get along with people, or how there are problems between girls, I don't think those things are very good..."



So it's something like that, huh? Well, normally speaking, I guess so. A positive image didn't come to mind anyway.

I wasn't sure what kind of impression she took from me while was thinking in silence, but Yuigahama joined her fingers together in front of her chest, and fidgeted as she made inverted triangles.

"...I didn't want to show you this nasty side of me too." She said, chasing the corners of the hallways with her gaze.

"Don't be dumb." It was so idiotic, I let out a snicker. Nothing's going to change just from seeing that, idiot.

"It's not like I'm any good with her either."

"Uh huh, I guess it's a little different. It's not so much that I'm not good with her, but I think, I don't like Sagamin very much. But we're still friends, so."

"R-Right... So you still think you're friends, huh ...?"

"Uh huh, for the most part, that's my intention."

As usual, I still don't get what makes friendship between girls.

"But I think she might not feel the same way. It feels like she hates me."

"Yeah, probably. Just looking is enough to tell."

It's a little off from "hate", but it could be seen as antagonistic and hostility. I looked at Yuigahama in attempt to talk about this issue a little more.

Yuigahama was locked into a bizarre pose. "...Eh, y-you were looking?"

"Stop, just kidding, I wasn't looking. I wasn't looking at anything at all. It just kind of came to me."

"Well, it's not like, looking, is a bad thing or anything..." Yuigahama answered while rustling her hair.

Um, I'm sorry, I was looking quite a bit, like frequently and attentively. I'm sorry for lying.

As I was apologizing and confessing internally, Yuigahama had a sudden distant look in her eyes. "I was in the same class as Sagamin during our first year, see."

"Huh, did you guys get along?"

"Well, for the most part." Yuigahama showed an unusual expression that sat on the fence between worrying and thinking.

"...So you didn't get along then."

"Hey, where did you get that from!?"

"Then, you got along?"

"Uh huh, pretty much."

Again with that weird expression...

“In other words, you *weren't* getting along.”

Yuigahama sighed in resignation. “...Gosh whatever, that's good enough.”

Good enough or not, that was exactly what it was. Girl circumstances truly were a mystery.

“That time, see, Sagami and I were in a group that stood out a lot. And like, Sagami looked pretty proud about it too”

Sagami and Yuigahama. Well, there were probably others beside those two, but those two at the heart of class wasn't difficult to imagine.

Yuigahama had the looks, but aside from that, she was a girl who went along with people, proficient at complying with others. That's why she could conform to gaudy and outlandish atmospheres as well.

On the other hand, I felt Sagami was someone who, depending on the group combination, was content with aiming for that kind of position. Even in the planning committee, she promptly found friends, people that would stay with her, and established a group. Her inter-personal skills and her self-appeal ability were strong.

But once they became second years, their positions had changed. Just how did this gap form between Yuigahama and Sagami? Conceit, their varied environments...

The biggest factor was likely Miura.

The moment she became a part of class 2-F, she was already associated as the top caste. Through the process of selecting members, Miura used the cruel criterion of “cuteness” to choose who she thought she would want to get along with.

...She really was something else. She completely brushed off the relationship between girls and decided on the people who she wanted to be with. For better or worse, she truly was a Queen.

And then, there was the incompatibility between Miura and Sagami. I wasn't sure if this was the right way to put it, but her belonging to the group second to the top made it simple to understand.

That fact was undoubtedly humiliating to Sagami who thought strongly of group standings. Even if her placement in that top caste wasn't something she had no say in, the fact Yuigahama, who was in a similar position, was present there wasn't something she could accept positively.

Naturally, I had started to slightly comprehend Sagami's actions.

“That's why, I don't really like what Sagami's doing... Also, how Yukinon is listening to her request, and how Sagami is trying to get along with her...” said Yuigahama, and she then tilted her head from her own words. After looking

convinced of something, she made a small nod. "...Actually, I think I might like Yukinon a lot more than I thought."

"What the heck are you saying?"

Yuru Yuri might get a pass, but actual yuri wasn't something I could cover for, you know.

"No, no, I didn't mean it like that...! I guess I just don't like it when other girls try to get along with Yukinon... I'm kind of like a kid, huh?" Yuigahama blushed from embarrassment and rubbed her bun hair as if it bothered her.

It certainly was a petty desire to monopolize. This kind of selfishness wasn't all that rare even at a community center of girls in their childhood. My little sister Komachi had that kind of period at some point as well. The true nature of humans was something that wouldn't vary that significantly. Depending on how we were trained, it was simply just a matter of restraining those kinds of emotions. It was only occasionally that they would end up surfacing on our faces.

"Girls are a real pain, see. There's so much to deal with."

The sincerity she displayed when she stated that was so amusing, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Hey, hey, guys are on the same boat. We have things like little cliques where we get along with each other too. Girls aren't the only special ones around here."

"Really?"

"Pretty much."

"Oh, I see... People are a real pain, huh?" Yuigahama laughed. "Tahaha."

You got that right. They really were a pain.

And it's because I found that unpleasant that I left things alone all this time. Striving to keep up appearances was, surely, something not genuine.

"Promise me," said Yuigahama, and unable to make any sense of her sudden words, I tilted my head wordlessly in response. Yuigahama stood still, and gazed right back at me. "That you'll help Yukinon whenever she's in trouble."

Speaking of which, on our way home from the fireworks display, we did talk about something like that.

Similar to that time, her forceful sincerity overwhelmed me. That's why I answered, to my greatest ability, honestly and authentically.

"Only if it's something I can do."

"Okay, that's a relief then." Yuigahama said, and smiled.

You're putting me on the spot by placing your unconditional trust in me.

It looked like her brief words had a stronger persuasive effect. If she had included one reason or another, then I could've dug up the calculative nature and

contradictions behind them, but just finishing it with one smile, I was unable to look any further.

“Okay then, I’ll be going back to class. Do your best at the committee.” Yuigahama lightly waved her hand and dashed off.

I lifted my hand in response and began walking again.

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I parted ways with Yuigahama and walked down the hallway that led to the conference room. It was located on the corner of the L-shaped hallway that turned left. Going beyond that were the stairs that climbed to the third floor where our second year classes were held.

In front of those stairs, ahead in the shaded hallway, was a figure obstructing my path.

Wearing a coat despite this sultry weather and fingerless gloves with his arms crossed was an appearance I was familiar with, so I ignored it and went past.

The figure then slowly took out his cellphone and began calling someone.

Within moments, my cellphone vibrated.

The fact that he went through the trouble of calling me even though we both acknowledged each other’s existences started to get on my nerves. Even more, the figure proceeded to perform a little act that expedited that irritation even further.

“Fuumu, not getting through, it seems. I don’t suppose he could be busy...? Ha, ha, ha, if it’s Hachiman we speak of, then that is impossible. Do you not agree, Hachiman?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you...” That remark was something I couldn’t stay silent to. Had this been anyone else, I could’ve just ignored them with a scornful laugh, but my cheap pride wouldn’t allow this man, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru, to say whatever he pleased. “So? What exactly are you doing here? Climbing up and down these stairs for a diet?”

“Hmph, how nostalgic. I most certainly had engaged in that once before. But long ago, my knees were afflicted with effusion. Moreover... my old scar throbs. Indeed, my sore crotch that is.”

R-Really... I think you should watch your health more.

Disregarding my worries, Zaimokuza handed me a stack of papers he pulled out from somewhere. “In any case, Hachiman, have a look at this. What are your thoughts on this?”

“What? I’m not bothering if it’s about your light novel.”

If this was any other normal occasion, I would’ve been nicer, but I didn’t have the time. The conference meeting was coming up and I just didn’t have the luxury, time, interest, and good will to accompany him.

“Nay! It is not about the light novel!”

His pointlessly assertive denial sprouted some interest in me. If it’s not about his light novel, then what was it? I looked at the papers that occupied my gaze.

Zaimokuza showed a grin and dramatically posed. “Listen and be surprised! Feast your eyes and prostrate! And then... die and apologize... Were you aware that my class will be doing a play?”

“No I wasn’t... Besides, why is it necessary to die and apologize— hey, wait, wait, stop, you better not say anything more...”

“Do you know what is required when doing a play? That is, a script is needed...”

“No, stop it, don’t get ahead of yourself.” I said, but Zaimomkuza wasn’t listening to my warning in the least. He threw his fist up to the heavens, and as if singing a sonorous lullaby, continued to blabber about himself. Quite frankly, he was really annoying.

“Do not give me that. Those fools blabbered on about not wanting to do a normal play, you see. They suggested an original script, to say the least.”

“Hey, please, stop it already.”

I knew what he was going to say. I knew exactly where this was heading. It’s because I had treaded down that path once before during middle school.

It was only up until elementary school when original scripts like that, scenarios for fun, were allowed.

No, actually, it’s possible in elementary school as well. If it was during arts exhibitions and farewell parties, then writing scripts for comedic plays like that would be allowed. Heck, it’s even possible to get a commendation for it. But the moment you entered middle school, it would distort into a target of contempt.

“Phew.” I slipped out a dry laugh.

“Nu? What is the matter, Hachiman?” Zaimokuza asked.

I looked up at the sky from the window. “Nah... I was just thinking how fast everyone becomes adults.”

“Fu, a strange man you are... Like really, I didn’t understand a single thing you just said. Like seriously, are you nuts? Well, your matters are worthless. For now, my original script...”

I had the feeling he had just uttered something really irritating in the middle of the confusion there. I had yet to even give him my permission either...

But unfortunately, he was someone I knew. Quietly sending him to his grave would give me nightmares. With the kindness of my heart, I decided to give him a warning. “OK, I understand your story. Anyway, avoid making the heroine a girl that you like. That hurts a lot. Oh, also, don’t make yourself the main star.”

“Gegeh!? Hachiman, could you perhaps be an esper!?”

“No. Got it? I warned you.”

I wasn’t an esper, just someone with experience. Ever since then, I firmly resolved in my heart to never show things like that to anyone ever again.

“Hapon, indeed, indeed. So what you are saying is this?” said Zaimokuza, and he cleared his throat seriously. “Recently, it is more favorable to have villain and rival type characters than the orthodox protagonist, say, by making it cooler, it will be more popular?”

“You don’t understand at all...”

“Mu? What did I get wrong exactly?”

“No, your logic itself isn’t what’s wrong. The first generation of Precure starred the black one after all. They were probably aiming for color codes for their characters or something. What’s wrong is your existence.”

I wanted to emphasize that last bit, but Zaimokuza, with his highly efficient ears in dismissing things that were inconvenient to him, returned bizarre responses with “rufun, rufun”.

“I see, you certainly have a point. Your proposal, “The Cure Black Law”... This might just be, this might just be. Fumuu, as you would expect from the authority of Precure...”

“Hey, stop that. Don’t go calling me an authority as you please, that’s too much for someone like me. Besides, I’m part of the Cure White faction anyway.”

Indeed, “authority” was just too amazing. I was just someone who only watched what I liked, and it was at a trivial level where I had no idea who wrote the original script even with a quick glance, heck, I was even waiting for BDs for past DVD-BOX productions too, and in fact, I was at the point I’d be too apologetic to even remotely call myself an otaku and want to die instead.

“Homu, this reaction, could this guy be the real thing...?” Zaimokuza was retreating away.

“Whatever, forget I even said anything. Suffer and regret for all I care.”

It was pointless no matter what I said. In that case, the only thing left for him was to engrave a deep scar into his heart so that it wouldn’t ever be forgotten. Human growth was exactly what that was. Once you were hurt, looked down upon, and discriminated against, that was when you saw growth for the first time. People didn’t change from love, friendship, or courage.

I pray that the fine folks from class 2-C deal Zaimokuza the greatest injury he could ever receive.

“By the way, are you going to watch the movie in October?”

“Don’t be stupid. If someone like me went and the families and the little girls freak out, I’d end up feeling bad instead... I’ll buy it, the blu-ray I mean.”

“Kuh, you constrain yourself despite your overwhelming desire to watch it... A man among men!”

For some reason, he started weeping like a man.

I’m the one who wants to cry here. Why did I have to deal and talk with this guy at a place like this when I had work coming up?

I shook Zaimokuza’s gaze off and my feet that headed for the conference room felt heavier than normal.

Chapter 4

Yukinoshita Haruno makes a sudden offensive.

The news of Yukinoshita's inauguration as the vice-chairman of the planning committee was a few days after Sagami's visit to the Service Club.

Before the commencement of the regular meeting of the day, Sagami ecstatically made the announcement.

With the advisor Atsugi's initial approval as well as Meguri-senpai's acknowledgement of Yukinoshita, the revelation saw primarily positive reactions.

It was an anticipated and timely entrance.

The section in charge of the "assistant historians" to which I belonged would be losing a member, but it was a responsibility that didn't have very much work in the first place. It was judged that this transition wouldn't lead to any critical problems. *So, can I just not come anymore...?* The thought crossed my mind for an instant, but it was due to this section of sinecures that I was able to avoid participating in in my class. One mustn't call it a luxury.

Immediately upon her inauguration, Yukinoshita dove right into the work.

After compiling a new schedule and making it known to the committee, she had all the sections submit daily reports of their progress and checked them over.

Work had progressed forward without delay.

On the east side where public advertising was stressing over where to place their posters, they were instructed after calculating the flow of traffic from a map, while on the west side where volunteer management was having trouble amassing volunteering organizations, local award were established and handed out.

A grunt like me hadn't the slightest idea of the inner workings of the executives, but I did know for sure that Yukinoshita was putting impressive effort into the work.

Either way, Sagami Minami may have been the chairman officially by name, but it wasn't difficult to imagine Yukinoshita was actually handling most of the responsibility.

The situation was moving forward favorably.

In the meantime, the numerous held regular meeting had been approaching.

As scheduled, it was four in the afternoon.

Sagami took a fleeting look at the members gathered in the conference room and started with an opening. "Now then, we'll begin the regular meeting."

Everyone gave their “best regards” and bowed.

Starting first were the progress reports from every section.

“Okay, public advertising, you’re up first.”

The head of the section stood up, ready to report their current state of progress.

“We’ve completed 70% of our posting schedule, and as for the posters, we’re about halfway done.”

“Really? Sounds like we’re on track.” Sagami nodded her in satisfaction.

But following her words, as if usurping their warmth away, was a cold voice.

“No. It’s a little late.” The interior of the room grew rustled noisily to the unexpected voice. But regardless, the owner of the voice, Yukinoshita Yukino, paid it to no mind or bothered with it, and as if reproaching them, she continued her words. “The Cultural Festival is in three weeks. If we take into consideration that our visitors need time to adjust their schedules, there will be problems if we haven’t already completed all of that. Have you finished negotiating for the locations of the posters as well as uploads to the homepage?”

“Not yet...”

“Please hurry. Putting aside the working individuals, middle school students looking to test here and their guardians tend to frequently check the homepage.”

“Y-Yes.” Pressured by her, the head of advertising sank into his seat.

Silence hung over the conference. Sagami, sitting next to her, didn’t look like she comprehended what had just happened now either. Her mouth agape, she stared at Yukinoshita.

“Sagami-san, please continue.” Yukinoshita urged her on and the meeting finally resumed.

“Ah, okay. Then, volunteer management, please.”

“...Yes. At the present, there are ten volunteer organizations.” The head of the volunteers reported with reservation.

Sagami, feeling awkward as well, nodded. “They increased, huh? I wonder if it’s because of the local awards. Next is...”

“Are those only within the school? Have you confirmed with those locally? Please investigate the records from last year and try contacting them. As long we’re adopting the position of connecting with the local community, we have to avoid seeing a decline in participating organizations. Also, have you finished allocating the stage timeslots? How about the coordination regarding the expectations on the number of visitors and the backstage staff? Please compile everything in a timetable and submit it.”

The moment the situation tried to move along, a severe questioning was dished out. By no means would things be allowed to advance half-heartedly.

In that matter, from beginning to end, the meeting proceeded on, going to the health division and the finance accountants. As that happened, Yukinoshita reviewed over the particulars and handed out directions.

“Next, assistant historians.”

When I realized, Yukinoshita had started handling the proceedings of the meeting.

“There’s nothing in particular.” The head of the historians answered with brevity. In actuality, us assistant historians would see the highest amount of work on the day of the Cultural Festival, so at this stage, there was seldom work to do.

It was something that the chairwoman Sagami had understood, and after looking around the room, she attempted to end the meeting. “Okay, for today, we should stop here...”

“Historians, please make sure to submit a time schedule of the day of the event as well as equipment requests. As for video recording, there’s a limit to the equipment, so if the volunteer organizations plan to film as well, please take into consideration that there will be possibilities of time conflicts, so please discuss it over with them until the equipment is received.”

“Yes...”

Yukinoshita instructed him without reservation despite him being a third year. The atmosphere turned sensitive thanks to that.

But that should’ve been the last of it. The progress reports from every section were given. Everyone sighed with relief, but the vice-chairman didn’t try to bring it to an end just yet.

“Furthermore... Is it fine if the student council handles the invited guests?”

“Uh huh, it sure is.” Still focused, Meguri-senpai immediately answered.

“In that case, we’ll leave that in your hands. If you can update the list of last year’s guests, then that would be helpful. As for the reception of the general visitor, that would be the health division’s job... Please hand them a list of the invited guests beforehand.”

“Okay, roger that.” Meguri-senpai nodded cheerfully. She then slipped out her impressions. “Gosh, you’re so amazing Yukinoshita-san... You really are Haru-san’s little sister.”

“...No, it wasn’t that much.” Yukinoshita showed humility to Meguri-senpai’s voice of esteem.

It certainly was true. Yukinoshita’s ability was remarkable. I really thought she was something else. But this way of doing things was somehow doubtful.

Following the regular reports, identifying problematic points and the examinations of their solutions, there was a consensus on the schedule from here on. On the whole, there was nothing else that needed to be discussed today.

Everyone perceived that the meeting would end and the atmosphere grew lax. A number of people stretched and groaned.

Realizing that she had taken the role of advancing the meeting, Yukinoshita directed her gaze to Sagami.

“Chairwoman.”

“Ah, right. Um, we’ll be counting on you all tomorrow as well. Good work.”

After giving her closing remarks, the members of the planning committee left their seats mumbling “good work, good work”.

I’m beat, totally tired, long day, that was pretty amazing though, totally, feels like I’m actually workin’ for once.

Those voices could be heard all over.

Everyone gave praise to Yukinoshita’s prudence.

She had been so overpowering, yet striking that the gossipy individuals were going as far as wondering who the actual chairwoman was.

Even an individual from the student council had raised her name as a potential candidate in the next election.

Indeed, that was Yukinoshita Yukino.

But without a doubt, amongst them all, the one who had it the hardest was Sagami.

Their circumstances should’ve been the same.

But another student in the same year suddenly took control of the meeting.

The other fell behind while the other tried to make up for that gap.

Had Yukinoshita displayed her capacity on her own, then it would’ve been a different story.

But, Sagami and Yukinoshita. A juxtaposition of their impressions had made evident the distinctive gap between them. It was obvious to anyone’s eyes. To praise Yukinoshita was to spite Sagami.

As Yukinoshita opted to remain behind and continue working, Sagami in her group of three left the room as if they were running away from the scene.

Now planning committee’s course of action had been made clear, our work would presumably become more optimized. Yukinoshita’s workmanship deserved commendation.

But, could it be that Yukinoshita had noticed?

That she wasn’t able to save anyone, nor anything.

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It was after school, an overnight since Yukinoshita went on an incredible rampage, scratch that, Yukinoshita became exceedingly active in the regular meeting, in the class of 2-F, where Ebina Hina was becoming exceedingly active, I mean, Ebina Hina was going on an incredible rampage.

“Wrooong! When you’re pulling the businessman’s necktie, you need act more seductive! What do you think the ‘suit for something’ is, huh!?”

What kind of suit was that...?

Subjected to Ebina-san’s zealous guidance, the group of boys was shedding tears.

But, not all the boys were as pitiful as they were.

Amongst them was one individual who was given warm hospitality.

“Um, isn’t this enough already...?” said Hayama, his voice bewildered from having been surrounded by girls.

“Not yet, not yet!”

“The real thing starts now!”

The surrounding girls thwarted him with enthusiasm.

Apparently, the cast members were in the middle of a make-up session. Targeting the live performance, they were doing repetitive trial and error. Sagami was also in that group as well... Well, there was still some time left before the planning committee anyway.

And, Totsuka, with three girls applying his make-up to his hair, was completely petrified.

“Totsuka-kun, your skin is *soooo* nice.”

“Yeah, it’d be a waste not to pretty you up with some make-up.”

“U-Um... It’s just practice, so I don’t think we’ll need the make-up.” Totsuka declined very reservedly, but his cuteness backfired on him.

“Applying make-up needs practice too!”

“That’s right!”

Instead, he lit the motivational flames of the girls even more. Totsuka’s body shrunk even more to their declaration.

“O-Okay... I-I guess so. Practice is important, right.”

Watching Totsuka look so dejected made him look just a little pitiful, but the thought of him becoming even cuter kept my desire to stop them at bay, a weakness of my heart.

In any case, the disparity of treatment between the make-up groups was quite terrible.

I mean, in Tobe and Oooka's direction, the girls had finished them up in just about five minutes. As for the class officer, he was applying most of the make-up by himself because no one had come to help him. On top of that, maybe because he was skilled at it, the way he appeared to be so used to it gave me the creeps too...

But I wasn't the only one watching over the make-up session.

Miura was looking in Hayama's group's direction and opened her mouth, looking like she had something in mind. "Soooo, what are we gonna do about the pictures? Don't we, like, need posters?"

Hearing that mutter, Ebina-san went up to her and energetically shot her a thumbs-up. "Yumiko, that's good! Right! If we're going to generate the most buzz for a musical about studs, then we have *got* to upload a picture of the characters. In which case, we'll need to publicize the gritty bitty details of the cast too. For the LittleMusical, we only want the original work to carry us to a certain point and let the rest be handled by the power of the cast!"

What's with that LittleMusical abbreviation? Then again, what industry are you from?

With Miura and Ebina-san's conversation as a trigger, the class discussion transitioned to the next.

"What about the costumes? Maybe rented ones?"

"Those'll be dirty though."

The girls groaned, and like before, Ebina-san went up to them. "No, no, the little prince at the very least should have a solid visual image, so existing costumes can't be used. Rentals should be okay for the others though."

"Is that a big deal? It's not like there's a lot of people that have seen it..."

"Are you looking down on original purists!? Do you *want* to get destroyed online!?" Ebina-san fumed and flamboyantly stated. This time, a voice came from another direction.

"Mmm, if we're renting out costumes, we just might be pushing it. We'd be just barely scraping by with our budget. I'd honestly prefer if we could use the rest of the money for other things, maybe..."

As Yuigahama scratched her head with her ballpen, she pressed away on her calculator and proceeded to write something down on her notes. *You're kind of acting like a housewife, you know.*

"Can we not make them?" said the Queen, listening and then pointing it out.

Her citizens then began giving it some consideration.

"Can anyone sew?"

"I've only ever done it in class, so."

Haa, they sure have a good balance of concerns, huh? I stood at the window side, impressed, and I spotted a blue ponytail incessantly entering and leaving my field of vision.

It was Kawagoe. Probably. Kawashima had been darting glances in the direction of the girl conversation, showing a look of interest since earlier. Color me a little surprised. I didn't take Shimazaki for someone who'd be interested in stuff like that.

Finding it somewhat strange, I decided to probe further into Okazaki's conduct, and it looked like the words "make", "clothing", and "sewing" were catching her attention.

As I thought about how out of character it was for Okazaki, I called out to her. "Hey, if you want to do it, you should say so."

"W-What the heck are you saying!? As if I'd want to!" Kawasaki bolted out of her chair to my busybody voice... Jackpot, huh? So the right answer was Kawasaki. Okay, maybe Okazaki might have been way off.

While it was fine that I got it right, she'd probably just refuse regardless of what I'd say. In which case, the backdoor was the way to go.

"Hey, Yuigahama."

"Waaah! Hey!" Kawasaki tugged at my sleeve, petitioning me to stop. I think she should stop reacting like that, because it's oddly stimulating for my sadistic side.

"What is it?" Yuigahama came over and placed her red pen on her ear. *Are you an old man at a horse race?*

"Kawasaki said she wants to give it a try."

"H-Huuuh!? W-What in the world are you saying!? Because I can't make something like that. Anything that fancy is impossible! I mean, I haven't made any clothes yet before... Um, so I'll just get in the way..."

So you've made things besides clothes?

Yuigahama stared at Kawasaki as she was contemplating something. Kawasaki uncomfortably twisted her well-proportioned slender body and shrank. Yuigahama's gaze stopped at a single point.

"Hey, did you make that scrunchie yourself?" asked Yuigahama, and Kawasaki nodded. "Can I see it real fast?"

As soon as she finished saying that, she extended her hand to Kawasaki's hair. Her long bundled hair expanded.

Yuigahama, with the scrunchie in her hand, let out a voice in admiration. The curled scrunchie in her palm reminded me of underwear somehow, so it made my heart skip just a little.

“Hina. Come over here.”

“Okaaay.” Ebina-san came over after being called. She examined the scrunchie in interest.

“This is, handmade... But, I also made one with a machine too.” said Kawasaki, and she took out another scrunchie from the pocket of her blazer. This looked like underwear too.

“Hoh, hoh... the sewing’s very neat, and the color is cute... You can make them by hand and also use a sewing machine... Great! Kawasaki-san, I’ve decided on you! We’re counting on you for the costumes~”

“Eh, wai— you can’t just...” Kawasaki tied her hair back together and showed an uneasy and reluctant expression, having been asked in incredible nonchalant fashion.

Going “now, now”, Yuigahama soothed it over. “It’s not like Hina decided on the spot. Kawasaki-san, you fix up your blazer and blouse and stuff, right? I think she’s asking you because she knows all that.”



...That's Yuigahama for you. She's got quite the eye when it came to observing people.

"Ah, okay, eh?" Kawasaki replied half-heartedly, with an absentminded, but also dumbfounded expression. She was probably feeling surprised and happy that something that trivial was understood by them.

"Indeed! With the limited resources that we have, we have to figure out a way to use them as effectively as we can, and we also happen to have the technology. That's why I want to entrust it you. Don't worry! If something happens, I'll take responsibility!" said Ebina-san, tapping her chest telling her to leave it all to her.

She really was a problem since she surprisingly had it together considering it's her. Since she normally kept this wisdom of hers under wraps, it almost made me want to doubt whether this character of hers wasn't just an act.

"If that's the case, then, I guess I can do it..."

Ebina-san grabbed ahold of Kawasaki, who was flushed red, by the shoulders.

"Uh huh, looking forward to it. Oh and also, we're going to patch up the clothes for the 'narrator'. We're going to make it somewhat shabby. We'll make it have some smears, ones that won't disappear."

In her rotten "gufufu" laugh, not a shred of that wisdom was left. *On second thought, I don't get this person at all...*

After confirming that the matters regarding the costumes got around, finally, there were no more actual things to do. Everyone went on to occupy themselves in their respective jobs.

I, too, had the sacrificial responsibility that no one wanted to do of being in the planning committee.

I went on my way to fulfill that duty.

Looking to leave the classroom, Yuigahama noticed my movement. She looked around the room and called to Sagami. "Sagamin, what about the committee?"

"Eh? Oh, sure, it should be okay."

"But..."

"...Ah, see, like I can't really help out much so I'd just end getting in the way, see?"

"That's not true. You'll help out a lot. But it's a lot of work so it'd be better to share the burden, I think."

"It's okay, it's okay. Yukinoshita-san's soooo reliable~ Besides, I have to write the application for our class's exhibition, see~"

As I listened to that conversation from behind my back, I slowly closed the door.

Right after exiting the classroom, I bumped into Hayama.

“Heading to the committee?” Hayama was scrubbing cleansing paper for his make-up. He must’ve come from the bathroom after removing them.

“... Yeah.”

“I see, do you mind if I go with you?”

“...?” I asked with just my expression alone, “Why? What the hell are you saying? I mean sure you can go there, but we don’t need to go together, right? Then again, you don’t need to go, seriously. Whatever, spit out a reason, eh?”

Hayama smiled. “Application for a volunteer organization. I’m just going to pick up some documents.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

A rather typical reason for Hayama. He was well-aware that he was a conspicuous individual. This Cultural Festival sought an individual like that as well. So that’s why he was taking the effort to respond to that.

I didn’t ask anything further, as was the case for Hayama, and we left the classroom. I felt some kind of passionate stare stabbing at my back, but I was probably mistaken. Right? Ebina-san?

× × ×

We exited the classroom and headed towards the conference room. Though there was no daily meeting, there was some work for the assistant historians, very unfortunate.

Another unfortunate thing was that it was just Hayama and me.

“.....”

“.....”

We didn’t exchange any words in particular.

He had probably perceived my “don’t talk to me aura” and followed along with that. I looked at him with a passing glance, but he didn’t seem too bothered or worried at all. Just normal. He was humming to himself, not particularly too concerned of my well-being.

He was incredibly carefree.

As for me, I didn’t have that luxury.

When I became conscious that it was just me and Hayama, the memories of the summer camp at the Chiba Village flashed through my mind.

Those cold words which he uttered that night, in that obfuscated room. The very thought that those kinds of emotions existed within Hayato Hayama sent shivers down my spine. It wasn’t that Hayama was frightening.

It's the fact that even *that* Hayama held those kinds of emotions while living his life that was dreadful.

A guy that was perfect, did things well, and an all-around great guy in anyone's eyes, *that* Hayama.

Speechless from beginning to end, we turned the corner of the hallway.

Once we made it up to the conference room, there were numerous people at the entrance peeking into the room. Was there some kind of incident? Even though the incident wasn't supposed to be happening at the conference room, but at the scene.¹

"Did something happen?" asked Hayama, nonchalantly.

The girl turned around irritably, but realizing that it was Hayama who asked, she anxiously let out an "um..." as she attempted to explain the situation. *Wait a second. What's with the blushing, huh?*

The girl began speaking in embarrassment, but this looked like it was going to longer than it needed to. If I was going to listen to her, I might as well save time and check out the scene for myself. When I placed my hand on the door, the surrounding watchers paved way for me.

Regret filled me instantly after opening the door. You should definitely emulate the conduct of the masses.

Ripples of tension swept throughout the conference room.

A few people moved to the corner and began forming a gallery.

At the center of the room were three people.

Yukinoshita Yukino.

Shiromeguri Meguri.

And lastly, Yukinoshita Haruno.

Yukinoshita and Haruno-san stood face to face, three steps away, in their relative positions. Meguri-senpai was behind Haruno-san in a fluster.

"Nee-san, why did you come here?" asked Yukinoshita, using both a severe and questioning tone.

"Oh c'mon, I came here since there was a notice about volunteer groups being accepted. As an OG of the orchestra club too."

OG... I thought she was talking about Super Robot² at first, but that probably wasn't it. Maybe she was referring to Australian meat³, but of course, that wasn't it either. I think it meant old girl? Hey, stop bad mouthing Hiratsuka-sensei!

Meguri-senpai forced herself between the two. "I-I'm sorry, I was the one who called her. We kind of met by chance in the city, and so, since it had been so long, we decided to talk for a bit, and it crossed my mind how we were kind of lacking volunteer organizations, so..."

Meeting Yukinoshita Haruno, of all people, on a coincidence was absurd. It was because she could make me think that way was what made her frightening.

“Yukinoshita-san, I’m sure you don’t know since you weren’t enrolled yet, but Haru-san during her third year was in the volunteer band. She was really amazing! So I just thought I could invite her...” said Meguri-senpai, looking at Yukinoshita in modesty, asking her, “How does that sound?”

“I’m aware of that... I was there and saw it. But...” Yukinoshita dropped her eyes to the floor, strongly clenching her teeth. She didn’t meet with Meguri-senpai’s anxious gaze. As a result, a short silence hung over them.

Haruno-san smiled with a look of embarrassment and came in. “Ahaa, Meguri. That’s not it. That was just for fun. But my plan’s to do it more seriously this year. I’m just wondering if I could get a place to practice sometime on campus... That’s okay, right? Yukino-chan. I mean you’re short on volunteers, after all~” Trying to give one last push, Haruno-san grabbed Yukinoshita’s shoulders. “I just want to give what I can to my cute little sister, Yukino-chan, see~”

“Don’t joke around... In the first place, nee-san, you’re,” Yukinoshita flicked her hands away, took a step away, and glared at her.

“Me? I’m what?” Haruno-san took Yukinoshita’s gaze head on without looking away. That displayed smile looked so sweet, yet just looking at it made my knees want to give way.

“...Like that, again...” Yukinoshita frustratingly chewed her lips and averted her eyes. The gaze she averted then crashed with mine.

“...!” She softly turned away from me as well. She was probably gazing at the same floor.

“Oh? It’s Hikigaya-kun! Hyahallo!” Noticing me, Haruno-san gave me a greeting that was indefinitely enthusiastic. What’s with that greeting, were you from Century’s End⁴?

“Haruno-san...” Hayama, who had entered late, stood next to me.

“Hi, Hayato.” Haruno-san lightly lifted her hand.



Hayama gave a slight nod in response. "What's up?"

"I was just thinking I'd volunteer for the orchestra club. Like how it'd be interesting if we gathered all the OBs and OGs and stuff. Sounds like fun, right?"

"You're doing whatever you think up like that again..." Hayama said in resignation.

I had known they were acquaintances, but there was something uncomfortable about it. It may have been because of their tone.

Casual, huh...? I looked at both Hayama and Haruno-san.

Haruno-san made a wry grin when she noticed that. "Mm? Aah, Hayato's like a little brother to me. We've known each other since a long time ago. You can be casual with me too, Hikigaya-kun, you know? In that case, should I call you Hachiman? Hachiman?"

"Ahaha." I rejected her notion with a parched laugh. *I implore you to never do that. Only my parents and Totsuka are allowed to call me by Hachiman.*

After feeling satisfied from her momentary mischief, Haruno returned her gaze to Yukinoshita. "Hey, Yukino-chan, I can come, right?"

"Just do whatever you want... I'm not the one with the right to decide anyway."

"Huh? Really? I thought for sure you were the chairwoman. You didn't get recommended by everyone?"

As a matter of fact, she did, and the reason being because she was Yukinoshita Haruno's little sister.

Haruno-san chuckled and smiled, as if she had seen through everything. Yukinoshita was looking away.

"So who's the chairman? Meguri... or not since she's a third year. Hikigaya-kun?"

It wasn't a particularly funny joke if she was trying to tell one. I answered only by shrugging my shoulders.

With the continuing unusual tension, the door of the conference room flung open without reservation.

"Sooooorry, I kinda showed up to class and ended up late!" Rushing into the class with not a hint of shyness was Sagami Minami.

Well, there wasn't a meeting today, and at the present moment, we were pushing up the schedule of the work. I could understand why had loosened up.

"Haru-san, this girl's the chairman." Meguri-senpai said.

Haruno-san's gaze was locked onto Sagami with curiosity.

Those eyes again. Those demonic eyes that chillingly evaluated your worth

“...Ah, I’m Sagami Minami.” Sagami’s voice waned, pressured by the glint in Haruno-san’s eyes.

“Hmmm...” Haruno-san didn’t look the least interest, yet she let out a small breath and took a step closer. “The Cultural Festival planning committee chairman is late? On top of that, you showed up to class instead? Uh huuuh...”

That tone of hers was terrifying. Her oppressive voice that sounded like it was wrung from the depths of her body caused Sagami’s entire being to shrink. Her energetic conduct earlier made her appear more vicious with the sudden transition to a frigid expression. Not only was there a disparity of intimidation between Haruno-san and Yukinoshita, she also wore her dark emotions on her face without suppressing them.

She exhibited this truth in her attitude, where she’d stay docile up to a given point so she could interact with you amicably, but the moment she decided to strike back, she would strangle you mercilessly.

“Ah, um...” said Sagami, desperately looking for an excuse.

Then, Haruno-san broke into a smile. “Yeah, a chairman *has* got to be that way, right!? As someone who can enjoy the Cultural Festival to its fullest, that’s absolutely perfect for a chairman! Sounds good to me! Um, Somethinggami-chan I think? Amagami? Oh, whatever. Chairwoman-chan works.”

“T-Thank you very much...” Haruno’s abrupt alteration of her lips upwards caused Sagami to be confused, all the while vitalizing her.

This very well may have been the first affirmation for Sagami since her arrival here.

As Sagami’s cheeks turned red from joy, Haruno-san continued. “Anyway, I have something I want to ask you, chairwoman-chan. Like, I really want to participate in a volunteer organization. So. I talked it over with Yukino-chan, but she’s a little bit reluctant about it. It’s because she’s not too fond of me...”

She showed her meek side and sniffed. I couldn’t get the urge to criticize her because of how cunning, yet adorable her outlandish attitude was.

“Eh...” Sagami sent a look towards Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita’s discouraged expression didn’t crumble. Nor did she meet anyone’s gaze.

“...I don’t see why not. We’re short on volunteer organizations anyway, and if an OG student participates, then we can appeal with the, um, connecting with the local community? Or whatever.”

Those sounded like secondhand words that were uttered by a certain individual, but Sagami informed Haruno-san as if they were her own.

“Kyaaa, thank you!” Haruno-san factitiously embraced Sagami in snappy fashion. But she quickly released her, and muttered with distant eyes. “Yep, yep, it

really is wonderful being able to come back to your Alma mater after graduation. I better tell my friends, they'll be tootally jealous!"

"Is that how it works?"

"Uh huh, that's how it is for me. I really do get this urge to come and visit sometimes..."

Haruno-san's words caused Sagami to contemplate for an instant.

Only Hayama and Yukinoshita were letting out brief sighs, as if conceding.

Ignorant to that, Sagami clapped her hands together. "...Oh I see. Ah, how about you call those friends of yours to show up too?"

"Oh, good idea! Do you mind if I call them now?"

"Sure, sure."

The moment she had finished saying that, Haruno-san buoyantly began calling her friends in one hand.

Yukinoshita, looking flustered, tried to stop Sagami. "Wait, Sagami-san."

But Sagami nonchalantly said with a lackadaisical face, "What's the problem? We're short on volunteer organizations anyway. We've also cleared the issue with connecting with the local community, right?"

Sagami had a triumphant grimace, but had she realized? That Yukinoshita Haruno was the one who strung her along for the majority of that proposal.

"Besides, I don't know what's up with you and your older sister, but that and this are two different things, right?"

"!....."

Just observing Yukinoshita and Haruno's interaction was more than enough for anyone to realize they weren't getting along. Pinpointing that, Sagami's proclamation caused Yukinoshita to stammer.

Sagami smiled victoriously, finally being able to stand above Yukinoshita for the first time.

"So it turned out like this after all..." Hayama briefly muttered. I wordlessly looked at Hayama, my interest piqued from his tone that sounded like he knew how everything was going to play out. My intention was to get an explanation from him, but Hayama didn't touch upon it at all, as if on purpose. "Okay, I'm going to grab the documents and go back."

Hayama left the conference room just like that.

Now, the only remaining abnormality in the planning committee was Yukinoshita Haruno.

After Haruno-san ended her phone call, she took a set of written applications and proceeded to talk with Meguri-senpai, Sagami, and her friends.

She wasn't much of a hindrance, but as someone who caught people's eyes, the committee members were distracted. Her conduct naturally garnered everyone's attention.

Only Yukinoshita didn't look that way out of stubbornness.

Sagami and her friends grew animated over something. Curious, I looked over there, and Sagami was elatedly chatting with her friends and Meguri-senpai was slightly nodding her head. Then, there was Yukinoshita Haruno who had glanced over here and stood up.

Haruno-san walked in my direction and deliberately took a seat next to me.

"Are you making sure to work, young man?"

"... Yes, for the most part."

"I'm a teeny bit surprised. Hikigaya-kun, your big sis totally thought you weren't the type of boy to do these kinds of things."

"Haa, that's what I thought too."

"Uh huuh... Instigated by Shizuka-chan perhaps?" Haruno-san nodded, grasping the situation. Though, there was another individual that we should've directed that surprise for being present in this committee.

"If there's anything unexpected, then wouldn't that apply to your little sister?"

"Really? I thought she would do it." I tilted my head not grasping the meaning of her words. Looking into my face, Haruno-san added, "I mean, I bet it was too hard for her to stay in the club, and not to mention, I, her older sister, was the chairwoman back then. Those are enough as reasons for her to do it."

Her tone was tinged with ridicule and I reflected on the meaning of her words little by little. I was certainly hesitant to call that current mood in the club to be anything but good. Beyond that, to Yukinoshita, just what kind of existence was Haruno-san to her, I felt I could understand that just a little.

"Though, it didn't look like the former turned out so well, huh?" Haruno-san added, chuckling as if she was looking at something charming.

This sisterly relationship was more complicated watching from a third person view.

There were times when brothers, or sisters, were compared to each other. Occasionally, their relative merits would be under scrutiny as well. I, myself, had a little sister. Whether it was because of the distinction between a brother and a sister or that we had compensated for each other's faults as we were raised, the thought of being compared never really crossed my mind.

But, in the case of the Yukinoshita sisters, they closely resembled twins.

The exceedingly, excellent older sister.

And the equivalently talented, but to this day had yet to win, excellent little sister.

If at least one of them had been unintelligent, there wouldn't be such an uncooperative feed between the two. Though, one or the other may have ended up being twisted instead.

Yukinoshita was still locked in her struggle against the illusion of her older sister who seemed beatable but wasn't. She could've just made it easier for herself now had she just ran away from the remaining result that was Haruno-san. Her pride, her strong conviction, wouldn't allow that to happen.

If she understood that much, saw through that much, might there been something Haruno-san sought to do? A more, different way of getting involved with her little sister.

"Um... what are you thinking?" I honestly asked.

What made Haruno-san dreadful was, above everything else, not understanding what she could be thinking about. It may be odd coming from me, but for someone like me, who had been living to this day observing people, in a bad way, even I was having trouble wrapping my head around her.

"Will you believe me if I say something?"

"..."

I wouldn't. I already had a fixated image of Yukinoshita Haruno. Even if she had some profound reason or majestic ideal, I wouldn't take it at face value.

It looked like she understood what my silence meant.

"I guess that's not something to ask then, hm?"

Her voice was freezing. Even if she tried to hide it or play it off, I think this was probably the actual coldness of Yukinoshita Haruno.

Since then, Haruno-san stayed quiet.

Haruno-san had a bright image associated with her, but when she stayed like that, she really resembled Yukinoshita.

When she became quiet, the surrounding noise started to get louder.

Because of that, everyone's conversations reached my ears quite well. Sagami and her friends in particular were getting excited, giggling and saying things.

And riding along the energy, Sagami spoke in a much louder voice. "Everyone, do you have a second?"

The boisterous conference room hushed at once.

Upon looking, Sagami was standing and looking throughout the room. She lightly coughed to prepare herself and nervously started speaking.

“Um, I have just a little tiny thing in mind, but... about how the planning committee should have fun and stuff. I mean, if we can’t enjoy it ourselves, then there’s no way we can get people to, or something...”

That was something I heard just moments ago...

“And to enjoy the Cultural Festival to its fullest, I think class is important too. Our schedule’s proceeding along nicely so we can drop our pace. How does that sound?”

Everyone took some time and gave thought to Sagami’s suggestion. Our state of progress wasn’t bad. Thanks to Yukinoshita clearing problematic points on one end, we were going at a satisfactory pace.

But Yukinoshita raised an objection to that suggestion. “Sagami-san, you’re a little mistaken. We need to keep at this pace so there’s a buffer...”

An energetic, outspoken voice blocked her. “Oooh, you say some great stuff. When I was doing it, everyone was trying their best for their classes too~”

Yukinoshita sent a threatening glance to Haruno-san’s voice, reminiscent of her times back then. Sagami went further with that attitude.

“See, there’s a precedent too. Besides... back then, it was super amazing, right?”

Though she was asked, Yukinoshita didn’t answer. Taking that as confirmation, Sagami went even farther.

“We really should try to inherit the good parts, you knooow? Learning from your ancestors or so they say? You should think more about others without putting your personal feelings in it.”

Meguri-senpai watched that exchange with a complicated face.

On the other hand, the other committee members looked at each other and clapped convincingly to Sagami’s suggestion. It looked like it was approved.

As a result, Sagami gave the call of dismissal.

If everyone was going to follow that, Yukinoshita wouldn’t be able to stop it by herself. Sagami smiled in satisfaction while Yukinoshita returned to her work with a cold expression.

As for Sagami, did she probably think she had done some work befitting of a planning committee chairman?

“You *really* do say some good stuff~ Right, Hikigaya-kun?” Sitting next to me, Haruno-san talked to me.

Did she have something else in mind for this too? Though, it probably wasn’t a good idea to be suspecting that.

This person really was a bit hard to deal with.

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The transformation immediately came into effect.

During the few days since Yukinoshita Haruno's appearance in the conference room, sporadic absentees from the meeting began to appear. This was the apparent result following Sagami's declaration that diffused amongst the planning committee members.

That being said, people were late thirty minutes to the meeting and the absentees were people who gave notice beforehand. There wasn't much of an impact otherwise.

While the workload had increased individually, it was just a matter of rotating shifts and taking breaks.

But with the addition of more volunteer organizations, and accordingly, the increase in cooperating locations towards public advertising, and budget related recalculations, the workload was increasingly becoming heavier, and a polarization of the amount of work was starting to show.

For the health division and the assistant historians whose work were mostly concentrated on the day of the Cultural Festival, increasing absentees wasn't a problem.

But in regards to the volunteers, advertising, and the accountants, there was an obvious lack of personnel.

Compensating for those areas was where the executives came into play.

The ones pitching in efforts were the student council members and Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita's intervention may have been a large asset to the workforce, but the workload that began to pile stubbornly retained its density.

My job as the assistant historian was also seeing an increase in assistant-related work as well. How odd... I was pretty sure this wasn't supposed to be all that much work...

"Umm... do you have a second?" The head of the group talked to me.

"Do you have a second" had a never-unending ring to it. My alert was going off.

But times like these were where I had prepared the appropriate correspondences to avoid getting more work passed on to me. As follows, these are "the four strategies to reduce the amount of work when someone tries to offload some on to you".

"Um, can I leave this to you?"

[Number 1]: "Ignore them until they say your name strategy".

"You listening?"

My shoulders were getting tapped. Tch, a failure, huh?

“Ah, who, me? Fuheh.”

“I want to ask you if you could do this.”

[**Number 2**]: “If you get asked to do something, wear an unpleasant face strategy”.

But the head had a rather resilient heart, and returned an indignant expression. “...Thanks.”

Because the other party had an even more unpleasant face than I did, I ended up losing that tug of war. Damn it, this wasn’t any good either! Fine, let’s try the next strategy.

“.....Haa.....Haa~~a...”

[**Number 3**]: “Sigh the entire time you’re working strategy”! With this, I’d be so annoying they wouldn’t even want to give me any more work the next time, and instead deal the trump card, “if you’re not motivated, then you can just go home”.

In practice, when I had a part time job, I was actually sent home at some point for that reason. It’s in my records.

But the leader didn’t mind it one bit. If anything, he talked to me after lifting up his glasses. “Finished?”

You can’t expect me to finish this that fast... I wouldn’t be working under you at all if I was that excellent...

It was time for me to use my final strategy.

[**Number 4**]: “Ostentatiously pound away on the keyboard until they want you to go home because you’re so annoying... strategy”.

Several PCs were loaned to the planning committee from the student council for a period of time. As such, handwritten work became a level more efficient, and so would the conspicuousness of my displeased key touches.

Tap tap tap. Putaaaaaap (enter key).

How’s that? If I was showing *this* much of a desire not to work, then you definitely wouldn’t want to give me any more, right...?

“Good work, I’ll be going home first. You can leave when you’re done too. If there’s anything you don’t get, ask the executives.”

“Mph, hssh.” (Translation: Ah, roger that, good work to you too.)

Fufu, looks like I wonderfully avoided getting more work pushed onto me... Now I had the least to do!

I looked triumphantly at the piled work on top of the desk— er... hooooooooooooooooo!?

He totally gave me more work!

Heck, I only ended up giving him a bad impression of me, just some punk that had a bad attitude. Also, his “you can leave when you’re done too” actually meant “you better not go home until you’re done”, didn’t it!? Nooooo!

Company employees truly had it tough. This had gone beyond what I had imagined...

What’s more, the title of “assistant” seemed to be getting misunderstood in a variety of ways and unnecessary jobs were starting to come around to me.

“Um... you’re the assistant historian, right? Can I ask you to do this too?”

“Haa, but this is...”

“The Cultural Festival is where everyone does it! That’s what work is all about! We have to help each other out!”

This person was being absurdly insistent.

Hey, copying posters was definitely not a part of my job... Besides, in what way were you helping me, anyway...?

But a request from an upperclassman wasn’t something I could refuse. The instinct of the sleeping Japanese residing within me, never had I cursed this system of seniority so much in my life.

There were also other people of the same upper status lifting their tea cups high in the air.

“Tea.”

“Haa...”

Why, do I have to...? Look, could you be thinking that just because the person you’re dealing with was under you that you could say whatever you wanted to? You probably forgot, but underlings were humans too, you know?

Hey, hey, at this rate, I was going to become a splendid company employee. “Nareru! CM (career man)”.[6](#)

Crap... I should’ve taken leave a lot earlier.

It was times like these where diligent people drew the short end of the stick. The work had already densely piled in front of me, and it wasn’t an amount you could finish in a day or two.

Unintentionally, I let out a sigh.

Approximately at the same timing, another deep, deep sigh could be heard.

When I looked, Yukinoshita was pressing against her brow, her eyes closed. Was she having a headache?

The apparent cause for that was in Yukinoshita’s field of vision.

The instigator, sitting nearby, spinning her pen while happily chatting with Meguri-senpai, was likely Yukinoshita Haruno.

Haruno-san was frequently coming to school for practice or something of the sort with the volunteer organization consisting of OBs and OGs she'd be participating in. In the meantime, she also showed up to the planning committees, comfortably fitting right in.

"Hikigaya-kun, tea for me too~"

"Um, an assistant's job doesn't include that, I think..." I ended my sentence weakly, lacking the confidence in what I had said. Add to that the sadness I felt from my corporate slave constitution as I poured tea while saying that. As the cups filled from the teapot, Yukinoshita quietly set her ballpen down.

That composure of hers had an incredible intensity to it.

"Nee-san, if you're going to be a bother, go home."

But that was perceived by everyone but Haruno-san. Haruno-san didn't budget from Yukinoshita's words in the least, like the joker would with the ace.

"You don't have to be so coldhearted. C'mon, I'll help out."

"That's fine, hurry up and go home."

But, while sipping from her tea cup, Haruno-san didn't take Yukinoshita's words seriously and grabbed the nearest printout.

"Let's see, I'll give you a hand as thanks for the tea."

"Ah, wait, don't just—"

Faster than Yukinoshita could stop her, Haruno-san began working, tapping away on a calculator in one hand. After filling the printout with red marks indicating she had finished everything, she tossed it over.

"The balances aren't matching here."

"...I was planning to check them over afterwards." Yukinoshita sullenly narrowed her eyes but took her words earnestly.

"Haru-san, you're the same as always, huh?" Meguri-senpai watched the two Yukinoshita sisters with a smile, giving off a comfy air.

Because of that comfy effect, even I was starting to feel comfy.

"Well, this isn't much. I'm used to it too. Why don't we finish up the others thing too, hm?" said Haruno, and she grabbed the nearby documents and began processing them.

This time, Yukinoshita didn't try to stop her.

It's just, with sucked in lips, she continued her work indifferently.

Chapter 5

Comfortably, **Shiromeguri Meguri** leads everyone by the nose.

*What is it that you keep doing and doing, but never goes away?
Work.*

I stared at my PC with vacant eyes while I had quiz time in my head.

Exactly when did I become in charge of recording the minutes? The one that *should* 've been responsible was, as I recall, supposed to be some third year that was the head of the assistant historians.

“Assistant historians. We haven’t received your minutes from last week.”

Just those few words from the great vice-chairwoman started it all.

Who’s responsible? Absent, huh? How about the next person? Also absent? Okay, next one. Next. Next...

And then it was me.

When I stated I’d take care of it, I actually snorted a “fuhi”¹.

I didn’t remember a single thing from all the meetings last week. As the minutes became partly made up along the way, using ridiculously vague terms like “earnestly under way”, “refer to supplement sheets for progress”, “managing accordingly”, “various arrangements planned”, and so forth, I filled in the rest. Not a big deal, since the person in charge would take responsibility. That’s what he’s for after all.

I ad-libbed where appropriate and sipped the tea I poured myself.

I’m actually making some progress since it’s a lot quieter than usual... I thought, and made a sweeping look around the conference room.

People engaged in similar tasks numbered less than twenty. Keeping in mind that five of them belonged to the student council, half of the many of which were sent from every class that made up the planning committee, two each from thirty classes, weren’t here.

In that group, undertaking the work with the greatest commitment was Yukinoshita. Due to Haruno-san’s absence today, she was calmly making strides in her progress.

Yukinoshita had been working much more frequently and longer than before, likely due to her hostile disposition towards Haruno-san.

There were also simple things that added to our workload.

Haruno-san's participation as a volunteer with her acquaintances must've served as trigger of some sort because there was an increase in other organizations as well. Accompanying that in excess was the need to regulate them.

Given the lack of personnel, on a normal basis, the work would've been beyond our capacity, but through the efforts of the student council member executives and Yukinoshita's high specs, and occasionally, casually appearing as a side to her volunteer practice to finish up some work, Haruno-san's ability, we were somehow able to manage.

While taking a breather, I looked around to see how the others were doing, and there was another individual doing the same thing as me.

It was Meguri-senpai. When our eyes met, she attempted to make small talk. "Ah, umm..."

It looked like she was trying to recall my name, but I decided to initiate instead, since having her ask me comfortably, "I'm sorry, what's your name again?" would lead me to a state of depression.

"Thank you for your hard work."

"Uh huh. Right, you as well," Meguri-senpai smiled. There was a trace of fatigue visible in her expression. But with the trending increase of workload for every member here, it wasn't something she could avoid.

"Is it just me, or are there less people here?"

"...Yeah, it seems like everyone's busy with other things."

The conference room, now deserted, felt considerably wider than it had been before.

"B-But I'm sure more people will show up tomorrow!" Meguri-senpai said, but that was unlikely.

If anything, there'd be less and less people. Once people realized that there weren't any consequences for skipping, the attendance rate would take a nosedive.

There was a thinking called the broken windows theory.

Suppose that a particular building in a city had a broken window. When left alone, it would invoke apathy, which subsequently would contribute to lowering morality and then encourage crime, or so was the established theory.

Instinctively, people were easy on themselves.

Every member of the planning committee weren't going out of their way to participate. Individuals who were forced against their will as I was were probably present as well.

But what instilled them to work was because of the cognizance that "everyone was doing it" and that they had pangs of conscience. If you removed that common

understanding or even the compelling force that prevented motivation from hitting rock bottom, eventual ruin was self-evident.

It's because it's much easier to search for a reason not to try than for a reason *to* try.

Everyone had to have experienced that at some point. Studying or dieting; it didn't matter. It's the weather, it's the temperature, it's the mood; anything could pass as an excuse to skip.

At some point, measures needed to be taken.

That was something Meguri-senpai should have been well aware of.

But no one was sure of what the appropriate action that should be taken. After all, the chairwoman herself wasn't present and the vice-chairwoman was proving to be more than excellent in compensating for all those who were absent.

Meguri-senpai and I were quiet, just sipping our tea.

Though I was enjoying my relaxing teatime (of course, in silence) with Meguri-senpai, I couldn't keep resting like this forever.

With activity at an all-time high towards the Cultural Festival, the workload continued to pile and pile.

The door to the conference room was knocked on again even now.

Speaking of which, in Beethoven's "Fate", I heard that the *dadada—n* was the sound of fate knocking at your door, but if that's true, it must've been something very straightforward.

Right now, the knocks at the door were likely from a person who came here with more work.

In other words, destiny = work, and for someone like me who had been trying to live life without working, I was the hero who defied fate, so by all means, I believe my life should be turned into a game under the genre, "Fighting Against the Destiny of Working – The RPG". I want to live the rest of my life on those royalties without having to work.

"Come in!" Meguri-senpai went ahead and answered since no one else did.

With an "excuse me", a figure came into the room.

The identity of Knockin' on Heaven's Door was Hayama Hayato.

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"I'd like to submit a volunteer form..." Hayama asked after noticing Yukinoshita.

"The forms go further in to the right."

Continuing to type while dealing with the customer would've net her zero points in the service industry, but it was Yukinoshita, so that's to be expected.

Fully understanding of that, Hayama left her with a clear “thank you” and went towards the forms.

Hayama should’ve finished his business here, but he was still present, strangely enough. As a matter of fact, he was approaching me. “...Aren’t there less people here?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Oh...” Hayama brushed the hair at his nape in contemplation. What, if it’s bothering you, cut it. Then again, like always, whenever he’s nearby, I’d get unusually annoyed...

“...So, do you need something?” I asked him, unable to put up with him any longer.

He broadly smiled. “Nah, nothing much. Just waiting for the documents to get checked. They’re looking them over for any errors.”

You don’t say...

So why are you near me...? I thought, but then it hit me that this was one of their tendencies. I had no idea why, but his kind tended to gravitate towards forming groups, especially when they had nothing better to do. They probably couldn’t refrain from approaching anyone they knew. If I likened them to puppies, then it stopped bothering me as much.

Along the way, one visitor after the other stopped by.

Volunteer organizations weren’t the only ones that needed applications; exhibitions in classes and in clubs also required one as well. The volunteer side of things was under the jurisdiction of the volunteer management group including issues with stage timeslots and equipment, but for the rest, food-related commodities were passed to the health division while reviewing and accepting applications were left to the group of executives

Today saw an influx of visitors, what with the formal deadline around the corner. Due to the bad timing, there was insufficient reception for them all and the situation turned in a state of chaos.

Eventually, a lost applicant came out from amongst them.

With the appearance of a first year and a distraught face, she couldn’t keep herself from coming over here to talk. With Hayama... *With Hayama.*

“Um... for the volunteers...”

“Applications for volunteer organizations go over there.”

He responded naturally as though he was a part of the planning committee. That invited misunderstandings and the other people who came to fill the forms settled for asking Hayama about the things they needed.

“I don’t really understand how to fill this out... Could you tell me how?”

“Sure, if you’re okay with me.”

I’m pretty sure this girl was asking only because it was Hayama.

While Hayama courteously filled her in, a line started to form behind them.

“Help me out for a bit.”

“Ah, hey.”

He forced me into helping before I could even react... Jeez, even the girl, who was passed over in that instant, had quite the face.

Both Hayama and I were pressed to deal with those in front of us and we devoted ourselves to processing the rest of the line. Meguri-senpai rushed over to help and with the three of us handling the reception, the application rush eventually died out.

“I’m sorry about that. Thanks so much!”

Once the situation had finally calmed down, Meguri-senpai poured tea. For Hayama... *For* Hayama.

Well, she was probably feeling guilty from having an outsider help us out. It’s just, um, I also happened to be part of that effort though... *sniff*.

Hayama thanked Meguri-senpai, and after a sip, he opened his mouth, “Do you have enough people working here?”

“I don’t have a total grasp on the entire situation. We grunts are already busy enough with our sections.”

“Your section?”

“I’m an assistant historian,” I answered.

“Ahh,” Hayama let out a convinced voice. “That fits you...”

“.....”

You lookin’ for a fight?

Digesting the situation so far, Hayama nodded with a know-it-all face. “I see. Must be a lot of trouble, huh?”

“...No, not really.”

Not really, it wasn’t a problem. Conversely, you could say there *was* a problem because there wasn’t any.

As of now, Yukinoshita alone was handling a majority of the work. Not only was she capable, she held the authority of the vice-chairwoman position, and given that she wasn’t participating with club or class, she had a surplus of time. She was covering for the absent members, even if that meant half of the committee.

“But from what I can see, it looks like Yukinoshita-san’s doing most of the work,” Hayama turned around and brought Yukinoshita up.

Yukinoshita stayed quiet for a moment, but Hayama's gentle stare that waited for her to answer caused her to open her mouth, "...Yes, it's more efficient that way."

"But it's going to all come down soon."

For the man named Hayama Hayato, it was rare for him to sound so forceful. Meguri-senpai grew tense in reaction to the atmosphere turning delicate.

Only the mechanical sound of the keyboard going *clack clack clack* filled the room.

"....."

That's true, sure. Yukinoshita didn't refute that notion either.

"So before that happens, it'd be better to rely on other people."

"Really? I don't think so," I said, and Hayama looked into my eyes, waiting for me to continue. "It's a fact that Yukinoshita doing everything by herself is much faster. The small amount of losses we've had is one of the merits. On top of that, believing and entrusting things to others is pretty bothersome. All the more so when there's a distinctive difference in their abilities."

We, at the very least, *I* couldn't believe and entrust things to others.

Even if things didn't turn out for the better, then it was fine to blame me, it shouldn't be directed towards anyone else. If you resented someone, then there was no end to it.

That wasn't kindness or responsibility. If it was about yourself, then you could give up, but with other people? You wouldn't be able to.

If only that guy did it *this* way that time, if only this guy did it *properly* that time; having to live with these thoughts was too heavy, painful, and miserable.

If that's how it's going to be, then it was better to do things alone.

If it's something you regret yourself, it's just a simple matter of crying over it to let it pass.

Hayama narrowed his eyes slightly, and let out a sigh as if with slight sympathy. "...Will it really go well that way?"

"What?"

"If things turn out for the better that way, that's fine. But, right now, it's not, and soon enough, everything's going to fall apart. And it's not like you're allowed to fail, right? That means you need to change how you approach things."

"Guh..."

This guy, what a sound argument. What, were you some kind of famous tea production site? He assamly, I mean, easily refuted my argument. As I groaned in frustration, there was a small voice.

“...I suppose, so.”

It looked like Yukinoshita was also hit where it hurt. At some point, her hands had stopped typing away on the keyboard.

But Yukinoshita didn't have anyone she could rely on. It would've been a different story had Yuigahama been here, however.

“...That's why, I'll help out,” Hayama said.

“But leaving it to an outsider is...”

Hayama answered Meguri-senpai's concern with a smile, “No, I'll coordinate the volunteer organizations, and nothing more. Basically, I'll act as their representative.”

It was an attractive proposal. Unlike defined organizations, the volunteers had classes and clubs as the representatives and a different chain of command. Since each group varied in hierarchy and what they planned to exhibit, having to deal with every one of them accordingly would undoubtedly become too convoluted.

If all of that could be handled on the volunteer side of things, then that would reduce the burden on volunteer management, which at the present moment, would mean removing a considerable amount of weight off of Yukinoshita's shoulders.

And further, if the volunteers could coordinate themselves independently, then that was reasonable as well.

Meguri-senpai worried about it for a little bit, but lifted her face and smiled. “In that case, okay. I'll be happy if we could leave that to you...”

“How about it?” asked Hayama.

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin and thought briefly. “.....”

“Yukinoshita-san, it's also important to rely on others,” said Meguri-senpai, kindly admonishing her.

What Hayama and Meguri-senpai had said was undoubtedly and absolutely correct. It was the best, it was inspiring, it was a beautiful showmanship of comradery.

People used to being helped by others were fine.

Without hesitation, they could rely on others.

Cooperating and combining your strengths. In the deepest meaning of those words, it surely was a wonderful thing.

But I had no desire to blindly praise those things.

I mean, just think about it.

If everyone doing things together was a wonderful and good thing, did that mean doing everything alone was a bad thing?

Why should people who fought tooth and nail alone all their life need to be rejected like this?

That was something I couldn't allow.

"...Relying is important and all, but there're only people who do just that. It's fine if they actually needed help, but there're also people who were simply just taking advantage of you."

I had taken a much more aggressive tone than I had imagined. Realizing that Meguri-senpai's complexion had changed, I played it off as a joke. Frightening a beautiful, comfy person was a bit too much.

"More specifically, uh... umm, ah. Right, like the guys who keep giving me more work. Really, I just can't forgive those guys. I can't exactly take it easy right now since it's out of my control... but I can't forgive anyone else who can!"

"You're horrible, aren't you!? Meguri-senpai responded brightly back, interpreting what I had said as a joke.

"I'll help you out too," Hayama made a strained smile.

Yukinoshita gently exhaled a short breath. "Certainly, it looks like the workload is starting to affect even the historians, so I'll rethink over the assignments. Also, since Shiromeguri-senpai believes so as well, I'll gladly accept that proposal... I'm sorry."

Her gaze was still directed towards her PC. It wasn't clear who that apology was meant for.

I could've easily passed it off as her form of consideration for me, but it's not like I was trying to cover for Yukinoshita. She had no reason to apologize. I just couldn't forgive anyone who had it better off than I did. It was as simple as that.

I couldn't tolerate how people who were doing things honestly were affected by those around them. I couldn't turn a blind eye to how people striving earnestly were given all the blame.

That's all there was to it.

Then again, it's not like I was completely helping either. On the contrary, there was the new task of redistributing the workload. I was useless here and that was that.

"Okay, let's work hard."

"I'll try getting in touch with the people I can tomorrow."

Hayama smiled while Meguri-senpai vigorously nodded.

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"It looks like there's even less people now..."

It was the planning committee the following week. Even less people were present. A comparison from before wasn't even necessary. Only Yukinoshita and several individuals from the executives could be seen.

Meguri-senpai groaned worryingly, "I tried to contact people too. I really should've rejected Sagami-san's proposal after all..." She must've been referring to Sagami's opinion that "class was important too".

After Meguri-senpai said apologetically, Yukinoshita stopped her hands that were flipping through documents. "It's not a problem. I'll handle looking over and accepting the applications from every department. Until we get them approved, I believe we should be able to proceed without issue."

From a glance, the work was moving forward smoothly, possibly an effect from having the work redistributed in the committee.

This was an excerpt from some anime or manga, but supposedly only twenty percent of ants actually worked seriously. Another twenty percent didn't do squat. The remaining sixty percent was on the fence between working and not working. And this apparently could be applied to people.

In other words, the people part of that sixty percent contemplated between going on one side or the other after judging the mood. It was also possible they leaned towards one side or the other to the point where they wouldn't cause any troubles and it was enough for them to make an excuse.

With how the planning committee was going now, the working ants had slightly poor prospects.

Specifically, it wasn't that people weren't coming, but that the mindset "it should be fine even if I didn't go" that was spreading in the committee.

Bigger numbers caused anyone to be relieved. The feeling that it was okay to do something if everyone else was doing it was definitely real.

Putting it in a different way, then "the trend right now wasn't to work at the planning committee".

Whenever and wherever, I was always a part of the minority. It felt like it was decreed by heaven at this point.

But there were still people amongst us that were truly expending the effort. The student council members were, as you'd expect, unified and dutiful. They were performing their usual administrative jobs alongside their responsibilities as the planning committee executives.

And that very well may be due to the charisma of the head, Meguri-senpai. Today like every other day, the members were working together to support Meguri-senpai who was a comfy, but somewhat ditzy person.

Meguri-senpai responded in kind and assisted them as much as she could. She made her rounds, speaking to the executives and people present here.

“The turnout’s kind of bad, but since there are people making sure to come, we definitely have to work hard. We’re totally depending on you, okay?”

“Hahaha, thank you for that...”

She didn’t forget to talk to me. Thank goodness... Had I been the only one she hadn’t bothered to talk to, I definitely would’ve said goodbye to this place tomorrow.

I put my bag down and checked over the work for today. Since I had been getting things done little by little for some time now, I was making some considerable progress. If I kept at it, everything would be over relatively soon.

As I was slugging around, my shoulders were tapped.

I turned around to find Hayama holding numerous files. Though the other members hadn’t showed up, Hayama would come by occasionally, even so far as to proactively dabble in committee work. Coming everyday would’ve been pushing it, but whenever there was an opening in his schedule, he’d take the time to come.

Hayama sure was one *great* guy.

“Sorry for interrupting you while you’re in the middle of work. I need thirty minutes of your time with the equipment applications.”

“R-Right...”

He had specified the time and objective, so I had no real reason to refuse. It wasn’t a bad way to pass work around.

Truly the epitome of a boss.

And now, I was Hayama’s wonderful subordinate. Ergh, I want to die.

As we were working in silence, there was a loud clattering sound coming from door being opened. In the conference room barren of people, it reverberated awfully well.

With everyone’s gazes directed at her, Hiratsuka-sensei motioned her hands and called out at the front of the door, “Yukinoshita, do you have a moment?”

Yukinoshita poked out her face above the display of her PC on the desk. “Hiratsuka-sensei... My hands are a bit tied right now... If it’s okay with you, I can listen here.”

Hiratsuka-sensei took a moment to think. “Fumu... Well, it’s not something that needs to be pushed to another day...” She walked into the conference room and stood next to Yukinoshita. “It looks like you haven’t chosen whether to go with the humanities or sciences yet,” said Hiratsuka-sensei.

“...I’m sorry. Right now isn’t a good time.” Yukinoshita hung her head in shame. She removed her hands from the keyboard and softly placed them on her knees.

“I see... I know the planning committee is taking up a lot of your time, but don't go overboard.”

“I understand,” Yukinoshita succinctly replied.

Hiratsuka-sensei then smiled at her as if gently admonishing her. “Umu... Well, we can wait until after the Cultural Festival is over. Since you're enrolled in the international cultivation class, it shouldn't affect your class change. There's still time. Heck, it's just a survey of the sort. It's not something you need to think too deeply about.”

Hiratsuka-sensei lightly patted Yukinoshita's head as if caressing her, lifted one hand and left the conference room. Yukinoshita fixed her hair as she watched her off with a sullen look.

It was a bit of a shock for *that* Yukinoshita to overlook turning in something like that. I wasn't the only one who felt that since Hayama was looking at Yukinoshita with a doubtful gaze.

Because of that, both of us had stopped working.

“...Hey, isn't it about time?”

It's hard to speak up when the other person was working quietly, but now that we weren't doing anything, I could! Hurry up and liberate me from this work!

When I spoke up, Hayama snapped back to reality and smiled. “Yeah, sorry. Let's do this again.”

I didn't mean that... “Isn't it about time I'm done?” was what I wanted to say... not, “Isn't it about time we got started?”

I elegantly explained my words, but with Hayama's smile, I couldn't really tell him I meant something else. There was still some time left until the thirty minute promise was up... Okay, maybe I couldn't be freed yet.

While I was building a list by inputting the details from the applications into an excel sheet, Meguri-senpai who was working nearby struck up a conversation with Yukinoshita. “Yukinoshita-san, are you going to go with the humanities or the sciences?”

“I'm still a little undecided...”

“Oh, I see, right, right. I know how you feel when you get stuck. I worried about it too. Then, which subjects are you good at in? The sciences?”

“...That's, not exactly it,” Yukinoshita wasn't particularly upset, but her response was somewhat cold.

When Meguri-senpai wasn't sure how to continue the conversation, Hayama stopped working and lifted his head from the screen of his PC. “Yukinoshita-san. She's also good with subjects in the humanities too.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is,” Meguri-senpai looked relieved when Hayama interjected.

...Right, I had a vague idea of it, but Yukinoshita should’ve been proficient in the humanities subjects as well.

I was third in our year at Japanese, followed by the second Hayama, and then Yukinoshita, the first. We were the immovable top three, and we would continue to be placed amongst the top if we decided to elect a humanities course.

In addition to that, she was always reading books and her image alone suggested she belonged on the humanities side.

“See, I picked the humanities. If you’re worried about which one to go with, feel free to ask me anything!”

“Haa... Thank you very much. I appreciate your consideration.”

So polite or so I had thought, but she was being incredibly indirect with her refusal.

Meguri-senpai, however, didn’t realize that and continued talking in high spirits, “Yep, yep. Oh, but I don’t really get some things in the sciences, so I might not be able to answer. But maybe you can ask Haru-san? She chose the sciences.”

“...That’s, true.” A shadow loomed over Yukinoshita’s expression. Even so, Yukinoshita asking Haruno-san anything was an unlikely prospect in itself.

The taciturn Yukinoshita didn’t let out a single word after that. Meguri-senpai naturally became quiet with the atmosphere that pushed for silence.

What remained were the rebounding sounds of the *click click tak tak* of the keyboard and the flipping of documents like a poorly construed Morse code.

Within the still room, the coughs of people weighed on my mind. Even the light cough as though checking on the condition of their voice caused my eyes to move on their own, searching for the owner of it.

“...Class 2-F leader. You haven’t submitted a written application for your exhibition yet,” Yukinoshita sighed briefly with documents in hand.

Someone still hadn’t turned in their application yet this late in the game? Good grief. Who the heck was it...? Oh, it was meeee! I didn’t feel the slightest attachment to my class so it had completely slipped my mind...

Actually, I heard Sagami was supposed to write one and turn it in though... Well, not that I could confirm that since she hadn’t been showing up here recently.

“...Sorry, I’ll write it.”

I doubt waiting for it to be turned in would do me any good, so let’s just write one up.

“I see... Submit it before the end of today.”

I took the documents from Yukinoshita and promptly began writing.

Number of people, name of the class representative, registered name, necessary equipment, name of the homeroom teacher... What the, they wanted some sort of picture too? You sure you wanted to challenge a second-rate artist like myself?

I skimmed through the other entry fields.

I see, I don't have a clue.

I wasn't abstaining from class events for nothing. That, of course, meant I couldn't possibly have an idea of what name the class was registered under, let alone the number of people participating.

But that's exactly what this guy was here for. Actually, he should only be here for this moment alone.

"Hayama, give me the details for these," I said.

Hayama slightly thought over it. "Sorry, I don't really know all of it myself."

"That's good enough. I'll just write random stuff for the rest."

"You definitely can't do that."

"...I can hear you," Yukinoshita responded with only her voice, not lifting her face from the screen of her PC.

Hayama made a strained smile. "I think it'd be faster if you checked with the girls still at class."

"I see."

I sorted the papers together, left the conference room, and headed for my class.

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The classroom after school before the Cultural Festival was in a clamor. The loudness of the voices during times of labor like these and the plentiful number of participants went as far as to exhibit a degree of completion for the classes.

In a conversation between boys and girls, the boys would make the number of their popularity into one youth hit (yH) and represent another youth hit (yH) from their time spent engaging in work, and then compete over their protagonist levels using the value from multiplying the above two together. Having all the units the same made it really hard to understand.

Class 2-F in particular was demonstrating quite the amount of yH. There was the play, a stage built from combined desks, outfits that were being tailored at one corner, and practice at another.

"Jeez guys, do it right!"

A number of boys including Oooka were being scolded by Sagami.

So she was around here.

Well, it's not her showing at the committee would contribute to getting any of the work done anyway. Sometimes, the difference in ability tended to be quiet cruel.

Should I tell her to make the effort to show up at the committee, I wonder? I considered it, but a single word from me would likely lead to her saying behind my back, "Uhhh, Hikitan's, like, tooootally complaining to me. Gross. Power harassment? More like sexual harassment considering how gross he is (lol). I'm gonna sue (lol). Then again, he's not even my boss (lol). Like seriously, who is he (lol)...? Eh, really, who is he?" That scenario vividly played itself in my head as though a battle of the supernatural was going to unfold after I was awakened to the ability to see into the future.

I examined the entire room and noticed that my classmates weren't wearing the standard school uniform.

Could they have finally completed it...?

The terrifying soul-crushing weapon of destruction, the class T-shirt...

The class T-shirt. To put it simply, it was a T-shirt that every class made during the Cultural Festival. A rather pointless explanation since this should be self-explanatory.

Perhaps, the shirt was intended to illustrate the level of unity in a class, intimacy, and to incite hype for the Cultural Festival, and also to serve as a physical memento of memories and proof of one's youth.

But regarding these class T-shirts, nicknames of all the members were printed on the back. Based on my experiences as well, this was clearly the case.

Amongst all the nicknames written, only I had been entered to play with just my regular real name, "Hikigaya-KUN". A majority of the nicknames were written with a mix of hiragana and katakana, so the use of kanji specifically for my name only showed how out of place it was and made it totally conspicuous. Especially the "KUN" part which was written in katakana, it concealed the pains of the other party trying to squeeze it in somehow, and that misplaced kindness ended up making me feel apologetic instead.

I definitely took some considerable damage during my first year, but this time, bring it. Heck, I wouldn't even mind having my entire name written in kanji at this point. Hahaha, as soon as this Cultural Festival's over, it's going to be my personal dust cloth. It wouldn't even be useful as pajamas since it's not made from very quality material.

I looked around the class for Yuigahama.

Uhhh, Gahama, Gahama, er.

Er, jumping into my field of vision was a beautiful figure.

It was a being that exuded an androgynous, fleeting glamor.

The baggy sleeves of his coat were excessively long with only his fingertips peeking out. It was Totsuka dressed in an outfit for “The Little Prince”. He was just about in the middle of having his trousers hemmed up, the folded hems pieced together with marking pins.

When Totsuka noticed me as he was standing idly, he stretched his hand out of his sleeves and waved. “Oh, Hachiman. Welcome back.”

“...I’m back.”

Embarrassing as it is, I’m home and safe! I almost bowed out of instinct there too. If Totsuka could recite that to me every time he came to greet me, then I’d happily go home every day.

“Ah, that’s right,” said Totsuka, and he lightly jogged away with something in mind. He quickly took something out from his bag and hurried back. Along the way, for an instant, I held the expectation things would develop to where “he’d dive straight into my chest due to stepping on the hems of his coat!”, but life just wasn’t so easy. Reality was cruel no matter when and where.

“Here, thanks for letting me borrow this.”

Presented to me was a single book.

It was the novel that I lent to Totsuka the other day, “The Little Prince”. Because I had read it so many times, the edges of the cover were worn out and the entire book was somewhat dirty. I reflected a little on the fact that it wasn’t exactly in the condition to be lending out to other people.

“So I was thinking I’d return the favor...” Totsuka made a big nod as if slightly psyching himself up and looked directly at me as if in admiration. “Um... Hachiman, is there anything you like?”

You.

He almost got an instant response from me there. Heck, I even voiced the “y” part of the word.

“Y... Yeah, nothing in particular, I guess,” I answered, managing to gloss it over.

Totsuka slightly crossed his arms and began worrying in earnest. “Oh okay... T-Then, how about any favorite food or books, or... any snacks you’d want? It’d be nice if you could tell me.”

You.

Once again, he almost got an instantaneous response out of me. In fact, I even voiced the “yo” part of the word.

“Yo... You’re putting me on the spot telling me so suddenly... Well, if I had to say something, I guess I like sweet stuff.”

MAX COFFEE for example. Also, miso peanuts, or malt jelly, or Mother Farm's soft cream, or even Orandaya's peanut pie.

"Sweet things... Okay, I'll bring something next time!" said Totsuka, with a smile, and then a voice called him. It looked like they finished hemming up his trousers. Totsuka answered them and turned back around to me. "Okay, I'll be going."

"Have a nice trip," I answered Totsuka who raised his hand and watched him go... This kind of stuff was nice too. If possible, I'd like to see Totsuka off every morning from home. Still, why was it so painful for Totsuka to be taken away even though the chances were nigh on impossible?

Now that I was left alone, I looked around the classroom again.

Totsuka's cuteness was just too much that it blanked out my original objective.

Uhhh, Gahama...

Oh, there she is.

"Yuigahama."

Yuigahama, who was nibbling at her ice cream which she apparently went out to buy somewhere, was in the middle of slapping scraps of paper together of something. She raised her face and walked over. "Huh? Hikki, are you done with work?"

"Quitting work doesn't necessarily mean it will end."

"What the heck are you saying?" said Yuigahama with eyes that were looking at an idiot.

Tch, this was the problem with people belonging to labor-centric environments... *Why don't I teach this girl the true horrors and woes of being a corporate slave?* But I didn't really have the luxury to do so. With my hatred towards work tucked away in my heart, let's hurry and get the bothersome things out of the way.

"I'm still working. Sorry, but can tell me what I need to fill out on here? I need to turn this in by the end of the day."

"This is urgent? Ah, isn't Hayato-kun over there too?"

By "there", she must've meant the planning committee.

"Yeah."

"Okay, let's do it over there then. It's too noisy here. I was just about to go call him back so we can discuss the play anyway."

As we had that conversation, Sagami spoke up from the back, "Ah, I need to go the committee too. Sorry, everyoneee. I'm gonna finish this and then head over."

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We returned to the conference room and Yuigahama subjected me to a lecture on the exhibition.

The standard requirements like the needed equipment, the number of people, how the allotted budget was used and considerably abstract things like the purpose of the exhibition and a synopsis were all jotted down. Moreover, we were even required to map out a blueprint, something I could've glossed over had the entire thing required text only.

Talk about incredibly bothersome.

"I said that's wrong! Make it, you know, more *boooooom*! The props are going to be really flashy, okay!"

"I don't get it..."

It wasn't that drawing the diagram was incredibly bothersome, but trying to *makesense* of Yuigahama was.

Why were her explanations always so melodramatic...? It's incomprehensible to the point scary.

"Also, you also assigned the wrong number of people there."

"How humiliating... To be taught by Yuigahama of all people..."

"What was that? Whatever, hurry up and fix it!"

As I was guided under an unexpected strictness, I scribbled my pencil against the paper and we somehow made some progress.

The very sight of students diligently working, to the executives, was some form of stimulus as Meguri-senpai was amicably smiling as she did her work. Normally delicate, the conference peacefully saw the passage of time.

As if tearing apart that space was the sound of a screeching mechanical noise.

"Sooorry for being late! Oh, Hayama-kun, you were here!"

Following right behind Sagami were her usual two friends. It was her once in a blue moon arrival to work. She called out to Hayama and attempted to approach him, but before she could, Yukinoshita got to her feet. Though Sagami was startled from Yukinoshita abruptly blocking her path, without even a moment to be surprised, Yukinoshita held out a seal and documents.

"Sagami-san, I need you to stamp these. I believe there aren't any problems with the inspection of the documents. I revised any possible errors as well."

".....Really? Thanks!"

It was business right out the door with no small talk.

Whether it was because she was obstructed from talking to Hayama or it was because of the displeasure from being shoved work first thing upon her entrance, Sagami had a dead expression, but she promptly smoothed it over with a smile and accepted the documents.

Sagami stamped the documents one by one without so much of a proper look at them while Yukinoshita, the recipient from the onset, checked them over once again and filed them away in the file of approved documents. This wasn't anything new, but this composition of people had quite the number of problems, huh?

Since I had been working in the committee, I had a grasp of what was going on, but how did this appear to outsiders? With that thought, I glanced at Yuigahama and her lips were sucked in and her gaze lowered. Well, she probably had her thoughts on the matter. With no club activities and the odd feeling of distance that formed between her and Yukinoshita, reflected before her eyes was the interaction between Yukinoshita and Sagami. Watching it wasn't a good feeling at all.

On the other hand, the other outsider, Hayama, was still maintaining his smile. Moreover, he even responded to her.

"Good work, Sagami-san. Were you at class?"

Sagami twisted her body like a stoat and faced Hayama. "Uh huh, that's right."

"I see... So how are things going?"

"I guess things are going prettyyy well," Sagami answered.

Hayama paused a few seconds. That transparent void made his following words more prominent. "Oh, I didn't mean that, but the committee. I mean, the class is doing pretty well since Yumiko's handling it."

Mixed in with those words, whether consciously or unconsciously, was a scant amount of poison. If Hayama had intentionally chosen to express his words that way, there was something behind them. The actual meaning would be something along the lines of "you sure it's okay to be skipping out on committee work?"

But Sagami continued the conversation unaffected, the poison not having much of an affect at all. "Aah... Miura-san, she's tootally a lot peppier than usual, like sooo reliable." (Translation: That damn Miura, not only is she more grating, she sure is annooying trying to butt in.)

"Hahaha, I mean she's helping us out and all. It's not a bad thing at all." (Translation: You'd better stop saying any more, okay?)

I must've eaten some kind of Translation Jelly³ because I was starting to read into their words...

It wasn't like I was paying any it any particular attention, but Sagami's speech was really bad that I oddly got into the mood. Even I was sensing something underneath the words from a good guy like Hayama.

I followed the subtitles that were processed in my brain in my field of vision and there was a clap in front of my eyes.

"C'mon, hurry up and finish. I want to go back."

“Wait, in the first place, this isn’t my...”

As a matter of fact, I recall this being something Sagami was supposed to handle. Why was I stuck doing it? I just don’t get it. I just don’t... I jus’ dunna’ gettit Niyander Mask⁴...

“...So noisy,” Yukinoshita softly muttered to the *yap yap yap*’ing at various areas in the room.

Yuigahama and I reflexively shut our mouths, but Sagami continued her enjoyable time chatting with Hayama, that mutter seemingly not reaching her.

“Oh no, I tootally want to be like Miura-san, see. I really admire being able to lead everyone!” (Translation: I tootally want to crush her and take her place.)

“Sagami-san, you have your strong points too, so isn’t that good enough?” (Translation: Didn’t I say to stop saying any more? You should know your place since it’s for your own good, okay?)

“Ehhh? But there’s like nothing good about me!” (Translation: C’mon, I was making fun of myself there! Praise me! Praise me! Hayama-kun, praise me!)

“Everyone’s different. You might think so, but to other people, there are things that only they can see.” (Translation: No, sorry, I’m not too familiar with praising people, so I’ll just give you an accepted opinion instead.)

Literal subtitles you’d see jump onto the screen in Western movies had been appearing at the bottom since earlier and it was incredibly distracting. Western movies were definitely better off being dubbed.

Those thoughts were interrupted by a *clap* from a cellphone being folded.

“Hikki, you stopped moving your hands. We rescheduled the meeting for the play to tonight, so we’re going to get this done properly, okay?”

“Just twenty more minutes until it’s time to go home...”

All the pressure was stockpiled on top of me...

“Well, seeing that we couldn’t make it to class, there’s not much we can do from having things delayed, right?” Not ignoring our conversation, Hayama followed up.

What a good guy. Though, I wouldn’t have been put in this mess had you just given me a summary from the start. But since this was committee work, then that was that. With that in mind, I just had to endure...

“I’m the chairman see, so there are a few parts you’ll have to do for me, thanks.” (Translation: You had better do it right, slave. *Spit.*)

Just endure it... I’ll pay her back twofold after the second turn. Won’t I just lose my patience by then?

Anyway, after taking a considerable amount of time, we somehow managed to write up the documents.

“Finally done...”

“We sure are,” Yuigahama answered in exhaustion.

“Sorry about this. You were a big help. Thanks.”

“Eh? Oh, that’s okay. No problem at all. It’s actually rare for Hikki to ask for something too.”

“I guess so. Even I didn’t think a day like this would ever come.”

“Just how much of an idiot do you take me for!?”

I ignored Yuigahama’s indignant voice and went to submit the documents and Yukinoshita accepted it wordlessly. She checked over the first page, then the second page, and after she was done reading, she straightened the edges together, tapping the papers together on the desk.

“It looks good, thank you for your hard work.” Without a single glance to me, she organized the approved documents and filed them.

“What about the stamp?”

“...Ah.”

“That’s true,” Yukinoshita replied briefly and took out the documents again.

It was such a trivial, yet careless mistake.

That’s why it felt so out of place.

“Sagami-san. I need you to stamp this,” said Yukinoshita.

Sagami then stopped her conversation and took the documents. “Oh, sure. Actually, I’ll just give you the stamp and you can do it yourself, okay?”

“Sagami-san, you’re going just a little too far there,” Meguri-senpai didn’t let that slip by and advised her.

Sagami didn’t show any signs of shyness. “Ehhhh? But isn’t it more efficient this way? I think what’s important are the things we do and not these stiff formalities, riight? You know, trust or something like that?”

Listening to her vocabulary alone made it sound like she was spouting a wonderful theory. But for convenience’s sake, it was certainly much more efficient if Yukinoshita had been in charge of the seal instead of Sagami. Meguri-senpai with the same thoughts on the matter groaned, at a loss for words.

“If Yukinoshita-san’s okay with it, then it’s fine...” Meguri-senpai glanced in Yukinoshita’s direction to check her thoughts on the matter.

Yukinoshita appeared unperturbed and nodded, “I don’t mind. In that case, I will approve everything from now on.” As soon as she was entrusted with the seal, she quickly stamped the papers.

With this, today’s business hours were over. The bell had just rung at that moment as well.

“Okay, I’d say that wraps up today. I’m going to go lock up the facilities, so everyone can leave first. As for the rest of the executives, please check up on everyone leaving,” Meguri-senpai handed out her instructions and the student council members quickly scattered. For the planning committee that dictated the times to go home, they could absolutely not go past it themselves.

We promptly got ready to go home and left the conference room.

On the way to the entrance, Sagami who was talking with her friends went along with the flow and came to talk to us.

“Oh, does everyone want to go grab something to eat after this? Yeah?”

This person was only looking at Hayama when she asked that...

Hayama and Yuigahama moved their eyes. It looked like they were checking what everyone else’s plans were. Yuigahama directed her gaze towards Yukinoshita.

She answered indifferently, looking like she had an idea what that meant, “I still have some work to do.”

It wasn’t an excuse for her to refuse because she really did have work to do. Factor in that she was also given considerable discretion for the sake of trust from Sagami.

Her responsibilities and workload had magnified simultaneously.

“Oh, I seeeee, sure, not much we can do there.” (Translation: No, I didn’t even invite you in the first place.)

The subtitles had yet to disappear even now and I could easily see through her transparent intentions. You had better not look down on the power of the Wicked Eye...

Following Yukinoshita, I also refused. “I’ll be going home.”

“Okay, got it.” (Translation: You ain’t got a seat!)

I knew I wasn’t the one getting invited, but I think it’s one of my admirable points where I made sure to refuse anyway. I mean, c’mon, being told, “Eh, umm, what are you going to do? You don’t have to go, okay?” would make me cringe. No one would be happy anyway. Besides, why did I need to get restricted *after* work too, huh?

The ones Sagami were inviting weren’t Yukinoshita nor me, but the other two.

Yuigahama let out a reserved voice, seemingly already having her answer beforehand. “T-Today’s not going to work for me... I have to go to the meeting for the play.”

“Ehhh? Yui-chan’s not gonna go, huuh? C’mooon!” (Translation: Hey, hey, if you’re not going, then Hayama-kun’s not going to go, you know? Are you kidding me?)

Whoa, the response was quite different this time. Very open, weren't you? You were just a little too open like a certain skull head out there you know.

"Yeah, the play meeting, right? I'll go too." (Translation: I'll follow through with this conversation here.) Hayama dauntlessly took advantage of this opportunity and declined the offer.

Sagami reluctantly took back her proposal. "Oh okay, I see. Everyone has plans after all. Maybe next time then." (Translation: If Hayama-kun's not going, then whatever!)

Although I knew it wasn't any fun reading into people's words, I couldn't keep myself from following the subtitles.

With my terrible personality coming this far, it was quite the special ability.

Until we went our separate ways at the entrance, the subtitles for Sagami just wouldn't disappear. It looked like Sagami and the others were going to head home together with Hayama midway as they went outside, continuing their endless chatter.

I put on my shoes and went outside after them.

The evening was already long past and the shades of night began to expand.

"I'll be off then," Yukinoshita replied with a few words and went home urgently. She readjusted the bag firmly to her shoulders, as if the bag was heavy from all the documents she jammed in there to process at home.

"kay, Hikki, see you tomorrow," Yuigahama tapped my shoulders and ran off. She had a meeting now, huh? She had it rough too.

I pushed my bike from the empty parking bike area.

The street lights were unpleasantly dazzling. I had used my eyes way too much today. Those subtitles were actually pretty exhausting.

With worthless thoughts filling my head, one more came to mind.

Speaking of which, I didn't see those weird subtitles for some people, huh?



雪ノ下陽乃
haruno yukinoshita

Birthday

July 7

Skills

General cooking, laundry,
cleaning, housework, aikido

Hobbies

Reading, horse riding

How you spend your days off

Aimlessly traveling



城廻めぐり
meguri shiromeguri

Birthday

January 21

Skills

Instruments, afternoon naps

Hobbies

Afternoon naps

How you spend your days off

Studying for tests,
afternoon naps

Chapter 6

Unusually, Yuigahama Yui becomes indignant.

What do you call it when you keep working and working, but things never get easier?

My life.

Even Ishikawa Takuboku1 would agree. For an average person like myself, that's a given. I stopped my laboring hands against my better judgment and found myself staring at those hands with reproachful eyes. As a result, my laboring hands stopped entirely and it became harder and harder to work. What's with this deflationary spiral?

Just how and why are we so busy? I looked around at my surroundings to solve that conundrum. First, there weren't enough people.

The executives were bogged down by various problems and the helper Haruno-san wasn't here either. Hayama was doing his share of the work, tackling all the matters related to the volunteers alone. But the stiffness in his usual smile indicated even he was getting tired.

Lately, this number of people should've been enough to manage the work.

But unlike every other day, missing today was Yukinoshita. She would arrive here at the conference room before anyone else and stay behind later than everyone else to work every day.

That appearance of hers was nowhere to be seen.

"What's wrong with Yukinoshita-san today?"

"Who knows...?" I couldn't give an answer to Meguri-senpai's question. But it wasn't just me; no one else in this planning committee could either.

The door of the conference room was opened with a *creaaak*. Entering a room without bothering to knock was Hiratsuka-sensei's bad habit.

"Hikigaya."

"Yes?" I answered.

Hiratsuka-sensei walked over to me. Her expression was uncharacteristically meek. "It's about Yukinoshita. She wasn't feeling well so she took the day off. She contacted the school, but I figured that didn't reach the planning committee..."

She was exactly right.

After all, there wasn't anyone here who could keep in touch with her.

But still, not feeling well, huh? I knew she wasn't a physically active person, but I thought she was the type that paid attention to her health. Well, with how

swamped with work she was recently and the basic mistakes she made yesterday, she must've been considerably exhausted.

...Is she okay? She's living alone too, I thought.

Hayama lifted his face with realization. "Yukinoshita-san lives alone, so I think someone should go check up on her."

"Oh, I see... Okay. I wonder if someone can go check up on how she's doing. The other executives and I can hold down the fort here," Meguri-senpai looked at Hayama and me and said.

"Will you all be okay by yourselves?" Hayama asked.

Meguri-senpai frowned. But she showed us her usual, comfortable smile right after. "Hmm... Sure. As long it's something I understand, I should be able to manage something, I think." She may not have sounded confident, but her smile looked reliable.

If she insisted, then it would be better if Hayama and I handled the case with Yukinoshita and leave the administrative work here to the executives. It would be much more productive to have them here than Hayama and me, a volunteer and assistant historian.

Meguri-senpai was the only one with a bird's eye view on everything. Meguri-senpai ended with "thanks again" and tried to go back to work.

"President!"

Bam! The door to the conference room was flung open and the student council member briskly came inside.

"What's wrong!?"

"The thing is, there seems to be some complaints regarding the slogan..."

"Ugh! What bad timing!" It looked like a big incident immediately sprung up as Meguri-senpai dashed out of the conference room to deal with it.

Without the chance to inquire about the situation, we were left behind.

"...So, what should we do? Hayama asked. "I don't mind if I go."

Those words that sounded unusually provocative weighed on my mind.

If I, no, even if I went, it's not like there would be anything for us to talk about.

If Hayama chose to go, then I would see him off. Otherwise, if he said he wouldn't go, then I would be the one going instead.

"Well... it'd be better if you went, right? In this case, someone thoughtful and useful would be better," I said.

Hayama blinked. "...That's a surprise. I didn't think I'd hear you say things like that."

“You *are* going, after all. I’ll at least suck up to you for a bit.”

Hayama smiled wryly and faced me. “I see. But with that reasoning, wouldn’t it be better if someone thoughtful and useful *stayed* instead?”

That’s true. Given that we were lacking in manpower, the cliché was to leave a multi-tasking, capable individual at the site. If a party was lacking numbers, then it would be more efficient to seek the help of a high level hero instead.

“Ahh, if you put it like that, you’re right,” I responded while scratching my head.

Hayama’s gaze clashed with mine directly in front of me. “I’m going to say this while I can, but I don’t think you’re deadweight at all. You managed work from all the sections as an assistant, so there shouldn’t be anyone who can say that you’re useless.”

...I’m the one surprised here. I didn’t think I’d hear something like that from you.

“So, what are you going to do?” Hayama checked again.

Hikigaya Hachiman can’t win against Hayama Hayato. It’s something that everyone has in mind. I really think that is the truth. In reality, there probably isn’t a single component in me that can win against him.

It’s a funny story. The more capable and kind a person is, the less he’ll be able to live his life the way he wants to. Always being relied on by someone means they have to see to them. Eventually, it becomes ingrained in their life. They even go as far as extending out their hand to someone like me who stood in the corner.

“...I’ll go then. Regardless of what anyone thinks, it’s better to have you here. You’re capable and everyone needs you.”

“I don’t feel too bad when you put it that way—assuming you actually meant it,” Hayama showed a somewhat lonely smile. Hayama is a good guy, but it’s because of that kindness that he isn’t able to choose anyone or anything. To him, everything is important. I only realized just now how cruel that really is.

“...So that’s how it is. I’ll be heading out for a bit,” I said, and turned to Hiratsuka-sensei.

She then smiled. “I see... Alright, off you go then. I can’t disclose a student’s address however...”

“Ahh, that’s fine.”

I may not know it, but there was definitely someone else that did. It was a girl that would jump in feet first from just one or two words.

I quickly got my luggage together and stood up. My eyes met with Hayama’s eyes which were narrowed and sharp.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll let Haruno-san know as well.”

“... Yeah, that’ll help. Thanks.” I briefly thanked him, adjusted my bag on my back, and left the conference room.

I took out my cellphone as I headed for the front entrance. I made a call as I walked.

One ring, two ring, three rings... Seven rings and I was just about to hang up until the other end picked up.

[“W-What’s wrong? Calling me so suddenly...”]

“Did you know Yukinoshita’s absent today?”

[“...Eh, I... didn’t know that.”]

“It sounds like she got sick.”

I could hear her gulping from the other end of the phone. Getting sick wasn’t that much of a big deal. But considering Yukinoshita’s recent behavior and how she was living alone, you couldn’t help but be anxious.

She breathed in with resolve. [“I’m going to go check up on her for a bit.”]

Exactly what I thought she’d say.

“I’ll be going too. Can we meet in front of the school gate?”

[“Okay.”]

We quickly finished our call and I thrust my cellphone into my pocket.

It was still bright out, but the sun was beginning to decline. By the time we arrived at her place, it would be just about evening.

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On our way there, Yuigahama and I were mostly quiet.

Upon our rendezvous, Yuigahama bombarded me with questions about Yukinoshita’s well-being, but I had next to nothing for answers.

The apartment that Yukinoshita was living in was a well-known tower apartment, considered high-class even in the neighborhood.

In being high-class, the security was also strict. Getting in was no easy feat.

We called Yukinoshita’s room from the entrance. Yuigahama rang the bell.

Yuigahama called her and sent a text beforehand, but she didn’t get a response. So I wasn’t expecting her to meet us even if we stopped by.

Regardless, she rang the bell two times, three times even.

“Pretending to be out?”

“That’s fine as long it’s only that. But what if she’s too sick to even get up...?”

Your thoughts are just a little extreme, I thought, but I wasn’t in the mood to be laughing.

She paused for a moment and then rang the bell one more time.

There was a buzzing noise.

[“...Yes?”] The bell was answered with a faint sounding voice.

Yuigahama jumped forward and responded, “Yukinon!? It’s me, Yui. Are you okay?”

“...Yes, I’m fine, so...”

“So”. What did she mean by “so”? “So, go home”? Is that what she wants to say?

“Just open the door.”

[“...Why, are you here?”] She must’ve expected only Yuigahama to come by. Hearing my voice surprised her a little.

“We need to talk.”

[“...Can, you wait for ten minutes?”]

“Got it.”

We sat on the sofas at the entrance and waited as we were told for ten minutes. I suppose only good apartments had sofas at the entrances, huh...?

Yuigahama stared at her cellphone the entire time. Since her fingers weren’t moving, I could only assume she was fixated on the clock.

As I sat there absentmindedly, Yuigahama on the side stood up.

She rang the bell and called Yukinoshita.

[“Yes...”]

“It’s been ten minutes.”

[“...Please come in.”] When Yukinoshita said that, the automatic door opened.

Yuigahama paced ahead with no hesitation. I followed right behind her into the elevator and she pressed the button for floor 15.

The elevator ascended at a speed faster than I could imagine. The display in the elevator blinked one floor number to the next and we immediately arrived on floor 15.

We were met with numerous doors right out the elevator, but the door we stood in front of us had no nameplate.

Yuigahama strongly gripped her fist once as if confirming something and then reached out to the intercom with her finger.

I couldn’t say much about the quality of the bell, but the sound it gave off wasn’t a mechanical sound, but a sound that you would hear from an instrument. The bell was rung once and we waited for a moment. There were no signs of people in the building, possibly due to the soundproofed nature of the apartment. A

few seconds later and we could hear sudden stiff sounds of locks being undone on the door. It took a few more seconds until they were all unlocked.

As we waited at the front of the door, the door was opened slowly with no noise. Slightly poking out from the opening was Yukinoshita's face.

"Please come in."

Upon entering, there was a faint drifting smell of soap.

Yukinoshita's image also contrasted to how she normally appeared. The finely woven and white sweater looked oversized for Yukinoshita's slender body that the sleeves extended all the way down to the palms of her hands. Her collarbones up to her neck were in plain view and her black hair tied into a bundle dangled down to her bosom as if to hide away that deep neckline. Her maxi long skirt drooped down to her ankles.

From the entrance, numerous doors could be seen. The doors that clearly looked like bedrooms were at least three. The others appeared to lead to the bathroom and toilet. Further down into the hallway was the ambient lighted living-room and dining-room. So this was the rumored 3LDK² apartment.

In this spacious apartment, Yukinoshita was living here alone.

With Yukinoshita guiding us, we moved through the hallway into the living-room.

Peeking from outside the living room was an overhanging balcony. From the window, the scenery consisted of the completely dusk sky and the night view of the new city center. In the west sky, there was a lonely afterglow.

Resting on top of the miniature built glass table was a closed laptop. Next to it was a file of documents. It looked like she had been working last night as well.

The design of the living-room was simple, as if she wasn't expecting any visitors. It resembled the interior of a business hotel, utilizing minimal furniture that was simple, but effective. Amongst them, there was a sofa couch that felt warm, covered with a cream colored sheet.



In front of the sofa was a television stand. It was a little surprising to see that she owned a big television, but on closer inspection, the lower deck was lined with Destinyland goods including “Panda’s Pan-san”. I really hope she didn’t buy this nice of a television just so she could do this...

“Have a seat over there.” As we were suggested, Yuigahama and I took a seat without a word.

I was wondering what Yukinoshita was going to do, but she leaned against the wall. When Yuigahama asked her, “why don’t you sit too?” Yukinoshita softly shook her head.

“So, what is it that we need to talk about?” Though her face was directed at us, her gaze was looking further downwards. Even the glint in her eyes that should’ve been overpowering was docile like the abating surface of water.

I sat there not answering her question while Yuigahama looked for her words. “Ah, um... I heard you were staying home today, Yukinon. So I was wondering if you were okay.”

“Yes. You’re making a big fuss over one day. I made sure to notify the school.”

“You’re living alone, of course that’ll make people worry.”

“Aren’t you really tired too? You still look kind of sick,” said Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita softly faced downwards, as if trying to conceal her face. “I’m a little tired, but nothing more. It’s not a problem.”

“...Isn’t *that* the problem?” Yuigahama said.

Yukinoshita went quiet. Yeah, she hit her where it hurt. She wouldn’t be resting at home in the first place if things were going smoothly.

Yukinoshita appeared even more delicate than before as she continued to hang her head.

“Yukinon, you don’t need to do everything by yourself. There’re other people with you too.”

“I understand that. That’s why I reassigned the workload so the burden is less—”

“Even though it really isn’t?” She cut off Yukinoshita’s words.

Yuigahama’s voice was quiet and calm, yet it was passionate and urgent. It drowned out the surrounding sounds, leaving only her words.

“I’m a little angry with you, okay?” said Yuigahama, and Yukinoshita’s shoulders twitched.

It was reasonable for Yuigahama to be upset. She went as far as to slap away any help and do things by herself, only to end up getting sick.

I let out a small sigh and Yuigahama shot her gaze at me. “I’m angry at you too, Hikki. I even told you to help her whenever she’s in trouble too...”

So that’s why she was quiet the entire time on our way here. No really, I had no excuse. It was true I hadn’t been useful at all. I ended up dropping my shoulders in shame.

“...I’m not expecting the assistant historians to work beyond what they’re asked of. It’s already enough that he’s fulfilling his duties.”

“But—“

“It’s fine. There’s still time. I’m also working at home, so we haven’t really fallen behind. It isn’t something you need to be concerned with, Yuigahama-san.”

“But that’s just weird.”

“Is... it...?” Yukinoshita’s gaze didn’t move from the floor. “...What do you think?”

It took a slight moment for me to realize that her question was directed at me. The wall that Yukinoshita leaned against stretched to the kitchen and in the dim unlit interior, her expression was unreadable.

I need to tell her that how she was approaching things is wrong.

It isn’t like Hayama’s sound reasoning. That isn’t something I can say.

It isn’t like Yuigahama’s kindness. I don’t have that in me.

But I know where she made a mistake.

“‘Rely on someone’, ‘everyone should help and support each other’. You can’t get any more right than this. They’re the perfect solutions.”

“I see...” She replied indifferently and apathetically, just her crossed arms dropping weakly.

“But that’s idealistic. The world won’t run on that alone. There will *always* be someone who pulls the short end of the stick and there will be someone who pushes for that. Someone *has* to take the blame. That’s just reality. That’s why I don’t plan on telling you to rely on or cooperate with others.”

I could hear Yukinoshita’s soft exhaled breath. I was still uncertain of the implications of that sigh.

“But the way you’re approaching things is wrong.”

“...Then... do you know what the right approach is?” Her voice was shaking.

“I don’t. But what you’re doing now isn’t the same as how you did things before.”

“.....”

To this day, Yukinoshita's style was consistent. She wouldn't recklessly jump headfirst to save people just because they sought her help. At most, she would stay as a helper, always leaving the final call up to the will of the person in question.

But it was another matter this time. Yukinoshita handled the counting from 1 to 10, likely because the person in question told her so, and she would somehow manage something at the very end. That would've aligned with the nature of the Cultural Festival; putting aside whether or not everyone ended up happy from it.

But that conflicted with the ideal that Yukinoshita touted.

Yukinoshita didn't answer.

From there, silence filled the room.

“.....”

“.....”

The room was freezing. The sensible temperature was probably lower than the actual temperature.

Yuigahama sneezed. It was almost as if she was crying when she sniffed her nose.

Realizing that the room was gradually becoming chilly, Yukinoshita stopped leaning against the wall.

“I'm sorry. I didn't even pour any tea...”

“Th-That's okay, you don't need to do that... I-I can do it.”

“You don't need to worry about my health. I feel a lot better after resting for the day.”

“Your health, huh?”

This time those trivial words grabbed my attention.

Yuigahama stuttered, finding it difficult to open her mouth. She caught her breath, but her next words didn't come out. She paused for a moment and then slowly began talking. “You see... Like, I've been thinking, Yukinon. You should rely on me and Hikki. Not someone or everyone... but rely on us two, you know? I, um... it's not like there's anything I can do, but Hikki is—“

“...Is black tea fine?” Yukinoshita turned her back without listening until the end and disappeared into the kitchen. Yuigahama's voice could no longer reach that poorly lit side.

Their words were always parallel.

This high, high tower apartment resembled the Tower of Babel where their words wouldn't reach each other.

Yukinoshita carried in a set of black tea.

Tea time with no conversation.

Yuigahama held her cup with both hands and cooled down her tea by blowing on it.

Yukinoshita, still standing, held her cups in her hands and looked outside.

Speechless, I put the cup to my mouth and gulped it in full.

There was nothing more to discuss.

I set the cup and stood. "Alright, I'm going home."

"Eh, m-me too..."

Yuigahama stood up right after and we headed for the entrance. Yukinoshita didn't stop us in our tracks.

Even so, she followed us to the entrance with staggering footsteps as if standing up to escort us off.

As Yuigahama was putting on her shoes, Yukinoshita gently touched her nape with her hand. "Yuigahama-san."

"Y-Yes!?" Yuigahama shrieked in surprise when her neck was touched. She tried to turn around only to be gently held in place.

"Um... It's difficult for me right now. But I'll definitely rely on you some day. So, thank you..."

"Yukinon..."

Yukinoshita's smile at Yuigahama was frail. Her cheeks, however, were slightly tinged with red.

"But, I just want some more time to think, so..."

"Okay..." Without turning around, Yuigahama rested her hand on top of the hand that was pressing against her nape.

"Take care of the rest, Yuigahama."

"Eh, wa—"

I cut her words short and quietly closed the door.

Sorry, but take care of the rest.

Yuigahama had done what she needed to; in a way that only she could do.

But that won't solve the problem.

Then leave the solution to me.

They say that time is the medicine to everything. That's a lie. All it does is chase everything into obscurity. It makes everything pointless and worthless, simply masking away the actual problems.

They say that the world changes if you changed. That's also a lie. It's deception. The world will always try to drag you down and turn you in a caricature, plucking out any conspicuous components. Eventually, you stop

thinking. The world—your surroundings—are only brainwashing you into believing the notion that “I changed and so did the world”.

The world, your surroundings, the masses won’t change from those sentimental, hot-blooded, and idealistic outlooks.

I’ll teach you how to *really* change the world.

× × ×

The slogan of the Cultural Festival saw some trouble.

True. I knew someone was going to come out from somewhere and say something about it.

[Funny! It’s too funny! ~I can hear the sea breeze. Sobu High Cultural Festival~]

...Of course that’s not going to pass. I mean, this was Saitama’s 100,000 Stone Manjuus³ we’re talking about here. It wouldn’t be taken to so kindly in Chiba.

Well, let’s put Chiba aside. There were talks about how the slogan had been misappropriated quite a bit elsewhere, so the resulting decision of the negotiations ended with a no-go.

People were gathered on short notice to figure out how to deal with this pressing issue.

Haruno-san and Hayama, observers who’ve been here often as of late, were present. This was also a testament to the increasingly disordered planning committee.

The executives comprised of the student council members and Yukinoshita were thoroughly wrung through. So far they were able to manage with the dwindling number of people. But this incident was essentially the finale, capable of becoming the finishing blow to everything.

There were no signs of the meeting starting up.

Waves of noisy chatter spread throughout the conference room. Sagami was originally the one who was supposed to take control, but she was chatting in front of the whiteboard with her friends who were nominated as secretaries.

Meguri-senpai spoke up, unable to stay complacent, “Sagami-san, Yukinoshita-san. Everyone’s here now.”

Sagami’s chatter stopped. She then looked at Yukinoshita.

Naturally, everyone’s gazes were directed to her as well. Regardless, Yukinoshita continued to stare at the minutes in her hand absentmindedly.

“Yukinoshita-san?” said Sagami.

Yukinoshita jerked her face upwards. “Eh...?” It took a slight moment, but she quickly assessed the situation. “We will now begin the committee meeting. As

reported by Shiromeguri-senpai, we will be discussing the slogan of the Cultural Festival today.” Yukinoshita systematically propelled the meeting after readjusting herself.

First was a show of hands for ideas. But for a passive group like this, that was too high of a hurdle. No one had the motivation. Nothing, but chatter filled this earnest meeting.

Sitting next to me, Hayama lifted his hand. “I think it might be too hard to say our ideas out loud. Why don’t we write them down on paper? Explanations can be for afterwards.”

“I suppose so... We’ll take a moment to do so.”

Every member was passed a piece of white paper. Every person had a sheet, but you couldn’t say the same for ideas. It was to the point where people would giggle to each other and get a kick from sharing their jokes with each other.

Once it was time to submit them, they wouldn’t bother.

Though, in this lax group, there were a fixed number of people who actually worked even if it wasn’t apparent. There were also people who did their work as long they could avoid being trapped into a conspicuous position. They were the people who had supported the committee up until now. And now, it looked like they would be taking care of us again.

The slogans written on the collected papers were jotted down onto the whiteboard.

Friendship – Effort – Victory

Right. So it was mostly slogans to that effect that were listed.

One slogan that stuck out was “All Eight Corners of the World Under One Roof”⁴. *Whoa, I have a good idea of who actually wrote that...*

There was one more that attracted everyone’s attention.

[ONE FOR ALL]

After it was written on the whiteboard, Hayama went “oh” with a small voice.

“Stuff like that is kinda nice.”

It looked like it caught Hayama’s fancy. Right, you’re the type to like that kind of stuff. It’s even written in all capitals too.

I replied with a snort that meant “really?”

Hayama shrugged his shoulders. “One person for everyone’s sake. I actually like that stuff a lot.”

“What, so that’s what you meant. Sounds simple to me.”

“Huh?”

Haha—not even Hayama-san could comprehend my musings. Then let me explain, my good sir, the meaning of my words.

“Push the entire burden on one person and get rid of him... One person for everyone’s sake. Happens pretty often, yeah?”

——Exactly what every single one of you were doing this moment.

“Hikigaya... you—“ Hayama’s expression looked as if he were struck suddenly, but his gaze gradually grew sharper. He adjusted his body towards me and directly faced me.

We might’ve looked like we were glaring at each other.

The chatter around us stopped for a moment.

Since our voices were quiet, our surroundings at most only stayed at whispers of us.

Hayama’s quiet confrontation lasted a few seconds, though that was because I promptly averted my eyes.

No, it wasn’t because I was scared.

It was because everyone’s attention was focused at the front, so I wasn’t the only one.

Sagami talked with her secretary nominated friends and stood up. “Okay, this is the last one. This is from us: [Bonds ~The Cultural Festival of Helping Each Other Out~]...”

“Ughhh...” I reflexively let out my voice when hearing those words come out of Sagami’s mouth. Was her head the Hanabatake Farm⁵ or something? Was she making raw caramel in there?

My reaction stirred the surroundings. The scornful noises rubbed Sagami the wrong way. So it came to reason that she would point me out seeing that I, who was lower in position to her, was the cause of the noises.

“...What’s that? Did I say something weird?” Sagami kept up her smile, but her cheeks were twitching and she was visibly upset.

“No, not really...”

Say something and stop, but make it sound like you’re complaining. This was definitely the most irritating response. Since it’s coming from me who did it unconsciously and lost friends because of it, there was no doubt about it.

Get across the things that you couldn’t with words.

I know how to do that. It’s the method where you’re able to get across your intentions even if you words didn’t.

It’s because I’ve never had an actual decent conversation before.

Pretending to sleep during break, making an unpleasant face when getting asked to do something, and sighing while working.

It's because I've come this far getting my intentions across without the need for words.

I know the method... It's just, I only really knew how to use it in worthless situations.

"Are you sure you don't want to say something?"

"No. Well, not really."

Sagami lightly glared at me in displeasure and said, "Riiight, is that so? If you don't like it, suggest one yourself."

And that's why I went and blurted it out!

"[People ~Look Closer And One Person's Taking It Easy While Leaning On The Other Cultural Festival~]"

Or so!

...I thought the world had grinded to a halt.

No one said a word. Neither Sagami nor Meguri-senpai nor Hayama said anything; they were just dumbfounded. This was the situation they would call being found speechless.

The committee fell silent.

Even Yukinoshita had her mouth hanging open.

The stillness was destroyed by a laughing voice.

"Ahahahahaha! What an idiot! We have an idiot here! Just amazing! E-Ehehe~, ahhhh. Oh god, my stomach hurts." Haruno-san erupted into laughter.

Hiratsuka-sensei glared at me with a sour look. *You're scary ma'am. Like double scary, ma'am.* She then nudged Haruno-san with her elbow. "...Haruno, you're laughing too much."

"Ahahaha, ha... Mm, mmm," Haruno-san held back her laughter and coughed, noticing her frozen surrounding. "I mean, I think it's a pretty good idea. Yep. As long it's interesting, it's okay in my book!"

"Hikigaya... Explain..." Hiratsuka-sensei looking somewhat stunned asked for an explanation.

"Well, they say that the kanji for people, 人, shows people supporting each other, but isn't it just one person leaning on the other? I think the concept of the kanji works on the assumption that there will be a victim. That's why for this Cultural Festival—for this planning committee—I think it's very fitting."

“What do you mean by victim specifically?” Hiratsuka-sensei’s expression had lost its stunned look at some point.

“Just look at me. I’m a total victim here. I’m being forced to do a stupid ton of work. Heck, people are just giving me more. Is this supposed to be the “helping each other out” part that the chairman seems to be advocating here? I haven’t gotten any help at all, so I don’t get it at all.”

The gaze of every member focused on Sagami.

After checking Sagami who was trembling, they then all turned to each other.

The commotion went wild.

Voices propagated from one neighbor to the next.

The whispers would come up to me and then return back to the center like waves breaking on the shore and retreating.

Then, they all stopped at the center.

It was the center where the Cultural Festival planning committee executives and the vice-chairman Yukinoshita Yukino were sitting.

Not a single voice was raised in this conference room at this very moment.

Yukinoshita was the ice queen who ruled under an absolute autocracy, taking drastic measures since her inauguration. Everyone concentrated their gazes on her with expectations of some kind of punishment to be given to the spewed nonsense.

Then, Yukinoshita lifted the crumpling minutes that were in her hand to hide her face.

Yukinoshita’s shoulders trembled. She leaned her upper body forward over the desk and her slumped back shook up and down.

Everyone could only watch over that strange sight. The stillness that was painful even to the ears continued for a little longer.

Moments later, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh and lifted her face. “Hikigaya-kun.”

Her gaze crashed directly with mine.

It felt like a considerably long time since she had called my name that way and since I had seen those transparent, blue eyes.

Her cheeks that were faintly flushed.

Her mouth that wore a forming smile.

Her cerise and well-shaped lips gently moved.

With a smiling face that was both brilliant and reminiscent of the warm blossoming of flowers, she announced, “*Rejected.*”

Yukinoshita returned to business, straightened her back, and coughed once. “Sagami-san. Let’s stop here for today. It doesn’t look like we’ll come up with anything worthwhile at this rate.”

“Huh? But...”

“It would be a poor decision to waste away a day on this. Every member of the committee should think of a slogan and we’ll decide on one tomorrow. As for the remaining work, if every member participates for the remaining days, we should be able to sufficiently take back the lost time,” said Yukinoshita, quietly looking around the conference room with a compulsory gaze. “It looks like there aren’t any objections.”

No dissatisfaction was raised to her intensity. In this miniscule instant, she was able to get everyone’s consent to mandatory participation.

Sagami was no exception.

“Okay, right. Then let’s give it our all tomorrow too. Thank you for your hard work.”

After she gave her command, groups of twos and threes stood up from their seats.

Without giving me a glance, Hayama stood and left the conference room.

Following right after, people sent me painful, prickling stares after passing by me. Even people whispering “what’s with this guy” were amongst them. Seriously, what’s with this guy? Oh, that’s me.

After the committee members left the room, the usual remainders were the executives.

In the lax atmosphere, there was just one individual with a long face.

It was Meguri-senpai.

Meguri-senpai quietly got up from her seat. She came up to me and didn’t have her typical comfortable smile.

“I’m disappointed... I thought you were a really serious guy too...”

“.....”

I had no words in response to her sad whisper.

That’s why I didn’t want to work. If you strived to do your job, you would be forced with expectations. At some point, a simple misstep on your part would be met with disappointment.

I wiped away my regret together with a sigh.

I lifted myself out of my chair.

Just as I was about to exit the conference room, Yukinoshita was at the front of the door.

“Are you okay with this?”

“With what?” I asked her back, but she didn’t reply.

“I think it’d be better if you cleared up the misunderstanding.”

“I won’t be able to. It’s already out there, so the problem ends there. There isn’t anything more to clear up.”

Right answer, a misunderstanding; whatever it was, that was my final answer.

You can’t take back disappointment, nor can you get rid of the stigma branded on you.

Yukinoshita narrowed her eyes and lightly glared at me. “...You make excuses for the most pointless things but never when it comes to things that matter. I think that’s somewhat cowardly of you. No one can make an excuse if you do that.”

“There’s no point in making excuses. People act on their own the more important something is.”

“...I suppose so. That might be true. Things like excuses are meaningless,” said Yukinoshita, as if reflecting on it.

You can’t take back the answer you already gave out. There’s no use in crying over spilt milk. The egg you broke won’t come back. All the horses and soldiers of a king will never return to his side again.

It doesn’t matter what was said. You can never wipe away a bad impression.

Even though the opposite is so simple in comparison. Just one word will make someone appear hateful. Just doing one thing would make you seem hateful.

That’s why excuses are meaningless. Because even those excuses will make you look hateful.

Yukinoshita held her body and stood idly. Even so, she didn’t lean against the wall. Like always, she straightened her posture and lifted her face.

“...Then, that means I’ll just have to ask again.”

It was a will brazen and intense that could veil even hostility. Her beautiful eyes were as though they were stars that glowed translucently.

It felt like those eyes were telling me: “I won’t make any excuses. So, look at me.”

Her earnest gaze turned into something slightly warm.

“More importantly, what was that earlier?”

“What?”

“That hopeless slogan you brought up. It was absolutely tasteless.”

“It’s way better than yours... Are you some kind of thesaurus?” I said.

Yukinoshita purposely sighed. “Amazingly enough, you haven’t changed at all...”

“People don’t change that easily.”

“I suppose you were rather strange from the start.”

“Hey, that wasn’t necessary.”

Yukinoshita chuckled. “When I watch you, I start to think trying to force change is stupid.” She turned her back before she finished speaking. She trotted over to her desk to grab her bag and quietly pointed outside. “Get out” was what she was saying.

We both left the conference room and she locked the door.

“Well, I’m going to return the key.”

“Yeah, see you.”

“Yes, good bye.” She gave her parting words, but placed her hand on her chin and hesitated for a brief moment. Then, she added, “...See you tomorrow.” Using her hand from earlier for thinking, she raised it in reservation near her chest. Her palm which hesitated between being open and being gripped was waved slightly back and forth.

“...Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

We both turned our backs and began walking.

I had the urge to turn back after taking a few steps, but there were no signs of her footsteps stopping. In that case, I wouldn’t either.

Can we stay as we are without looking back?

Can I really ask one more time?

In life, you can never take things back.

Your mistaken answer will always stay as is.

If you’re going to overrule it, then you had to come up with a new one.

That’s why, I’ll ask again.

For the sake of knowing what the right answer is.

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The slogan of the Cultural Festival was chosen in the committee the following day.

The revitalized meeting had heated discussion one after the other. The result of the debate that went on for an extended period of time where everyone’s heads stopped working and became aimless was a single consolidated idea.

This year's slogan for the Cultural Festival was as follows:

[Chiba's Specialties, Dancing and Festivals! If We're All Fellow Fools, Let's Dance and Sing a Song!!]

Was that really okay?

It made me a little uneasy, but this was what the planning committee had concluded. Not to say I didn't like it or anything. Chiba's dancing songs were pretty famous and all.

The passionate meeting had yet to die as the committee members were still debating with each other.

To shift their motivation towards work, Yukinoshita softly whispered into Sagami's ears. "Sagami-san. We should change the slogan next."

"Ah, okay... Then, everyone, please change the slogan with the one that we decided on."

For now, the Cultural Festival planning committee restarted into action with Sagami's call.

Choosing the slogan must've been some form of tradition that deepened the unity between everyone as they were overflowing with motivation.

"Alright punks! Let's remake those posters!" Public advertising barked out.

"Wait a second! We haven't figured out the budget yet!" The finance accountant snapped back.

"Stupid! Toy with the abacus afterwards! It's now or never for me!"

"Whatever! Make sure to retrieve the thumb tacks after you fix the posters! Those are getting counted too!"

And so forth. Even the item management guys were beginning to chip in.

Every section actively exchanged ideas with the other. It was hard to believe they were the same members from before.

As for me, I was verbally insulted behind my back while being ignored into obscurity. But this wasn't bullying. Bullying didn't exist at our school.

Even when they gave me more work, they wouldn't say a word to me and dropped it in front of me. To make people work more even in this kind of situation was quite remarkable. The bosses, I mean.

I promptly typed today's minutes into a Word document and a voice spoke to me from above in high spirits.

"Hey there, working hard over here?"

Now that the committee was earnestly working, Haruno-san had some free time and was present since she was taking a break from practice. She especially made her way to me and patted me on the head.

“...As you can see.”

Haruno-san peeped at the screen of my PC from behind me. *Um, you're kind of close. What the, is this perfume? You smell really good, so please get away from me...*

“Ahh... You're not working at all.”

Why? I totally am...

I looked at her with my reproachful, rotten eyes and Haruno-san feigned surprise. “Oh, don't like it...? I mean, I don't see any of Hikigaya-kun's achievements on these minutes at all.”

“.....” I went silent.

Haruno-san looked at me and made a snobbish smile. “Hikigaya-kun? Time for a quiz! What can effectively cause a group to unify the most~?”

“A cold-hearted leader?”

“Don't be coy. You totally know the answer. Well, I can't say I dislike that answer though,” Her eyes grew colder, but she maintained her smile. “The right answer is... a defined enemy existence.”

Her true intentions were evident from that frigid smile.

Someone once said long ago: “The ultimate leader that is able to unite the masses; that is, the enemy.”

Well, just having someone there to be the target of all the hostility isn't going to change everyone's attitudes at the drop of a hat. That isn't possible.

But increase the number of people by four, even five, and they start multiplying like rabbits. The bigger the number, the faster thoughts diffuse.

They say humans are “empathizing” creatures. It's similar to how you end up yawning when you watch someone else yawn.

Barbaric fervor, fanaticism, and hatred, in particular, propagate easily.

Multi-level marketing programs and religion solicitations are on the same boat.

Anyone would feel better when being with someone.

Doctrines and sermons followed that same logic. As long they can make you think “desperately trying makes you look cool”, they were done.

Situations lie in the numbers.

The masses lie in the numbers.

Wars lie in the numbers.

You get people to jump on the bandwagon after building on the numbers. That was essentially winning. And the world now runs on that scenario. The one moving

the world isn't a leader with tremendous charisma. The one moving the world is the established outcome from the absolute majority, or from the promises born from that majority.

The rest is simple then.

If an absolute loser existence like [Hikitani@don't work hard] exists, then public opinion—the general masses—will trend away from it instead.

People who try are cool. People who didn't are Hikitani.

As long as that label continues to exist, people will have to try, their opinion notwithstanding.

Haruno-san chuckled and looked down at me. "Well, I guess our enemy here is kind of small-time though."

Leave me alone.

"But now that everyone's getting festive and excited, I guess it's a good thing."

"Yeah, now I have more work because of that."

That's why you should stop bothering me. I wanted to get that across to her, but she nonchalantly ignored it.

"That's fine. If a scoundrel like you is actually being diligent, then that'll rile them up in one way or another. They won't grow if the enemy doesn't keep it together, after all. Strife is the key to the advancement of technology~." Haruno-san started on her explanation, her eyes closed while wagging her finger. *Wow, she's kind of annoying.*

But with her humorous gesture, her opened eyes were looking over at Yukinoshita.

That gaze caused a baseless thought to flash into my head.

"Um, could it be..."

My moving lips were stopped in place by her soft fingers.

"I don't like perceptive kids, okay?"

Suppose that the existence of an enemy is the simplest way to spur human growth.

Could it be that this person was acting so she could appear as the enemy? I found myself thinking that despite having no proof at all.

Haruno-san smiled with a "just kidding", still holding my lips in place.

It was a seamless smile, perfect to the point it could've fooled me.

I was frozen in place and unable to say anything. Then, there was a sharp voice cutting in from the rear.

"Assistant, do your work."

Pom pom pom. She piled a bundle of documents in front of me.

When I looked up, Yukinoshita was staring down at me with really crazy, cold eyes.

“Dispose of the documents for the slogan change. Also, the minutes... are what you’re already doing now...” Yukinoshita moved her hand to her mouth and went “ah” as she raised her face. “...Then, send a notification to every group regarding the slogan change.”

“Hey, you clearly made that up just now, didn’t you?”

She totally said “then” just now, didn’t she? Whenever that gets used, it only made you look like you didn’t have anything else in mind.

“There are times when I get a flash of brilliance too. Wisdom is something that arises in conjunction with that, after all. Oh, also, while you’re at it, gather the exhibition written applications and upload them to the server.”

She just mentioned something really incomprehensible just now. She’s really bad at making excuses. Actually, did she just give me more work there? Weren’t you supposed to use “while you’re at it” for more work when it correlates to what’s being done at the moment? Was I wrong?

I looked at her doubtfully, but was suppressed by Yukinoshita’s glare.

“Anyway, get it done today.”

“Impossible...”

Since it was Yukinoshita, the labor environment actually appeared more lax. It was to the point where you’d skip out on work, cut your phone’s battery, and yell to your mom, “don’t bother with picking up the house phone for a while!”

But since I was at school, I couldn’t really stop...

As I was drowning in hopelessness, Haruno-san lifted her arm and waved it so Yukinoshita could catch sight of it. “Should I do it too?”

“Nee-san, you’re a bother, so go home.” Yukinoshita curtly said.

Haruno-san’s eyes then welled up with tears. “So mean! Yukino-chan, you’re so mean...! Well, I don’t have anything better to do, so I’m going to help out anyway. Hikigaya-kun, give me half of that.”

When Haruno-san reached out to the pile of papers, Yukinoshita placed her hand to the side of her head. “...Jeez. I’m going to review the budget, so if you’re going to do something, then let’s go and do that.”

“Hm? Fufu... Okaaaay♪!” Haruno-san made a suspicious smile for a brief moment, but she quickly returned to her usual spunkiness. She pushed Yukinoshita from behind and moved. It looked like they were going to discuss the budget.

When all is said and done, Haruno-san was doing her work.

I wasn't really convinced that someone busy like Haruno-san was able to show up so frequently just for her volunteer group. There was no way she was that free. *Then for what reason is she coming here?* But that probably wasn't something I needed to think about.

It would be more productive to think about how to get the work in front of me out of the way instead.

Fufu. Corporate slaves were exactly called as such because they couldn't do anything about it...

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As the Cultural Festival approached closer day by day, Sobu High began heating up in contrast to the declining temperature.

The classroom of 2-F was clamorous since the morning.

Today was for all-day preparation before the day of the event.

Tables were set up and combined together to build a stage.

With the class officer giving directions, Oda or Tahara, or whatever lifted up the background props created from plywood and cardboard.

Tobe, Yamato, and the virgin Oooka went *heave-ho* with considerable enthusiasm and carried over the airplane props.

Kawasaki was listening to her headphones as she fixed up the outfits. Miura and Yuigahama were chatting while they were decorating the fake red flowers.

Since it looked like there weren't enough flowers, the girls began making more. It must've been one of those things. You create the flowers by piling five sheets of tissue-like paper, fold it back step by step, hold the center with a rubber band, and then rip the sheets one by one. Yeah that. It's often seen at Cultural Festivals.

Totsuka and Hayama were rehearsing their lines together.

As for me, I was sitting idly at the corner of the stage with nothing in particular to do.

"Tonight... You mustn't come here."

"We'll be together forever."

The "narrator" directly conveyed his feelings as if to support the voice of the vulnerable little prince.

I knew it was just part of the play, but I couldn't help but grind my teeth... *Damn it, if I knew I I'd able to make these kinds of memories, I should've signed up instead.*

Ugh, I can't watch them any longer... I jerked my gaze in a different direction and the producer Ebina-san was there. She had a considerably glossy smile.

"YOU, go on out there!"

Which person from Something's & Associates⁶ were you trying to be? I beg you. Please don't start up an Ebina's & Associates.

"Sorry, I have the planning committee..." I answered.

Ebina-san tapped her shoulders with the rolled up script. "Oh. That's a bummer. Both of you would've made a good coupling too; Hikitani-kun as the "narrator" and Hayato-kun as the prince. Just now, you were watching the two of them practice on stage and were about to be consumed by the flames of jealousy— Oh! Is this what you call NTR!? Bufu!"

Her nose was dripping blood as though she was vomiting it out. She's freaking scary, seriously...

"God, there she goes again. Ebina. C'mon, blow your nose." Miura came over after noticing how noisy she was being and propped up the paper that was meant for the artificial flowers to Ebina-san's nose. Supposedly you're not supposed to blow your nose when you had a nose bleed.

After watching the class for some time, I stood up and left the class.

Every class was brimming with energy as I went on my way.

For loners, this was probably a difficult environment to stay in. If this was after school, then they could just disappear quietly and no one would notice. Then again, it's more like people acted as if they didn't notice, but if it's in the morning, you weren't exactly free to do so.

It was basically between "let's wait for instructions" and "let's just stand around".

Normally I'd be doing that, but this year, I was in the Cultural Festival planning committee.

I walked down the stairs, turned the hallway, and continued down the route that I had already gotten used to.

The conference room I arrived at saw a rush of traffic in and out. The door of the room which was typically closed looked like it had stayed open the entire day.

Yukinoshita was inside swiftly clearing work. Sitting next to her like a doll was Sagami. Haruno-san was spinning around in her chair discussing something with Meguri-senpai. *I don't really care, but Haruno-san has way too much time, doesn't she?*

I went inside the conference room and checked over the assistant historian shifts for tomorrow and the day after. People were continuously flowing into the room.

"Vice-chairwoman. The test updates to the homepage have been completed."

"Understood... Sagami-san, please confirm." Despite asking her, Yukinoshita checked it herself as well.

“Sure. It looks good.”

“Right. Please deploy the production environment to the website.”

She cleared one job after the other.

“Yukinoshita-san, the volunteers don’t have enough equipment!”

“The volunteer management section should discuss this with the representative of the volunteers. Please rent out the equipment according to what the item management group decides. Send a report to us afterwards.” It was only after she instantly handed out those instructions that Yukinoshita noticed the person sitting next to her. “Sagami-san, there aren’t any problems so we should be in the clear to move forward.”

“Ah, okay. I think that sounds good.”

When things went well, an urgent problem arose. Regardless, the problems were promptly resolved one after the other and the Cultural Festival planning committee was operating smoothly.

Amongst them all, Yukinoshita’s role was huge.

“The volunteer rehearsal is running behind schedule so we’ll move them to the end of the opening ceremony rehearsal. So keep that in mind.” Once she finished giving out instructions, she breathed out.

Haruno-san snuck up behind Yukinoshita and embraced her. “That’s my Yukino-chan!”

“Get away from me, don’t get close to me, go home.” Yukinoshita faced the PC while giving her the cold treatment.

Haruno-san let go of Yukinoshita and gently placed her hands on Yukinoshita’s shoulders. “Yukino-chan, you’re doing really good work. It’s like when I was doing it back then.”

“Uh huh, that’s true. It’s all thanks to you, Yukinoshita-san.” Meguri-senpai praised her as well.

“Not at all. It’s not that amazing...” As if trying to cover her embarrassment, Yukinoshita’s key presses on the keyboard grew louder.

“That’s not true. Your contributions here are extremely helpful, Yukinoshita-san,” said Meguri-senpai.

The other executives nodded their heads in agreement. The ones who went through thick and thin were them. So of course they’d feel much stronger about it.

The only exception was one individual who maintained a stiff smile. Sagami continued to smile without saying anything.

“This is how a planning committee should be! Ahh, I feel so gratified right now.”

Everyone nodded to Haruno-san's words. Everyone was satisfied. They were aware that they fulfilled their obligation as the Cultural Festival planning committee.

That's why no one saw what lied behind her words.

It was something that rejected the earlier planning committee. But it was also something that criticized the one who led it, Sagami.

Only those obligated to the people with warped personalities would be able to notice.

Sagami crumpled the paper in her hands under the desk.

Haruno-san expressed a smile in that instant. "Tomorrow's going to be so fun... right?" Her gaze was directed at me for only a moment. Just what kind of future those dark eyes gazed at, I still wasn't sure.

It was only a little longer until the opening of the festival full of barbaric fervor, youth, deception, and fabrication.

At long last, tomorrow was the Cultural Festival.

HIKIGAYA HOUSEHOLD

A CERTAIN DAY
BEFORE THE
CULTURAL FESTIVAL

Onii-chan, what'cha doing on the computer?



Nothing much. We're deciding on the slogan for the Cultural Festival, so I was looking around online to see if there's one I can use.



Uh huh... Anyway, you should clear the history for the "history delete" keywords you used to search last time. A while ago, mom used the keywords "history delete restoration", you know?



What the heck is mom doing...? She really needs to stop doing that...



Something weird popped up and she got really mad.



Don't falsely accuse me! It wasn't me! Actually, the only one who'd search stuff like that would be pops. Actually, a long time ago, some weird international phone bill was sent to us and he got so angry that I wanted to die.



I really didn't need to hear that... So why are you so sure it isn't you?



You can secretly search the things that you don't want your family to know... That is, if you had a smartphone!



Wow, what a terrible CM...



Chapter 7

This is the very moment **Sobu High** is festivaling at its best.

Throughout the darkness was the rustling of students. It was possible that each individual voice meant something, but with so numerous voices overlapping, there was no meaning.

Blackout curtains were meticulously hung over the stage, covering up any openings. The feeble glow of people's cellphones and the emergency exits could at most illuminate a person's palm.

In this darkness, nothing was distinct.

And it was this exact moment where everyone had become one within the darkness.

Under the sun, our differences were as bright as day, making us aware of how hopelessly distinct we are. But in this darkness now, the ambiguous silhouettes blurred the line that distinguished one person from the other.

I see, it made sense why everything was blacked out before an event.

It essentially meant that the person who bathed in the spotlight that cut through the darkness was exhibiting what makes him unique from the masses.

Therefore, the one taking center stage must be someone special.

The voices of the students dissipated one by one.

The clock on my wrist indicated 9:57.

It was almost time to start.

I pressed the intercom button and it signaled. The microphone had a pick-up delay from the moment the button was pressed, so I waited two seconds before speaking.

[—Three minutes to start. Three minutes to start.]

Within the second, there was a static noise in my earphones.

[—This is Yukinoshita. All staff, report in. We'll be going as scheduled. Report any problems immediately.]

Once she finished speaking with her calm voice, the transmission was cut off with a *buzz*.

Static noises followed.

[—Backlights, all clear.]

[——This is the PA system. No problems here.]

[——This is the backstage. The cast members' preparations are slightly behind. But they should be able to make it in time for their turn.]

Numerous sections gave their report. I honestly wasn't able to catch all of them.

I mean, I was already doubtful of what *my* job entailed. The assistant historians were loaded with quite a bit of tasks on the day of the event. That included miscellaneous jobs concerning the stage of the opening and closing ceremonies. My job today was to be the time keeper for the ceremony. It was as simple as announcing "it's almost time!" or "there's still some time left." I couldn't exactly refuse orders from the top anyway.

All the reports aggregated at the control tower, Yukinoshita.

[——Understood. Everyone should be on standby until the cue is given.]

I was at the wing of the stage and stared at my watch.

For every tick of the hand, the silence settled in further.

Beyond the small window should've been a gymnasium filled with numerous students. Only, it resembled some kind of gigantic living creature wriggling in the darkness. Like Nyaralathotep¹, for example. An otherworldly god with thousands of faces... Huh? Wait, no. Mil Mascaras² was the one with thousands of faces. Okay, whatever.

A minute until show time and the gym sank into a sea of silence.

Everyone was living in the same moment, forgetting to whisper, let alone murmur.

I pressed the button of the intercom.

[——Ten seconds]

My finger continued pressuring the button.

[Nine]

My eyes were glued to my watch.

[Eight]

I stopped breathing in.

[Seven]

I breathed out in between the counts.

[Six]

I caught my breath for an instant.

[Five seconds]

Someone took over the countdown.

[Four]

It was an extremely sedated, even cold, voice.

[Three]

And then, the counting voice disappeared.

However, there was definitely someone counting down [Two] with their fingers.

Yukinoshita was looking down at the stage from the bay window of the PA system room on the second floor, looking up from the wing of the stage.

Then, the final countdown, [One], ended in our heads in the soundless space.

Instantly, the stage erupted with lights dazzling to the naked eye.

“Hey, you guys! You guys culturing out there!?”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Meguri-senpai made a sudden appearance onstage and was met with the bellows of the audience.

“Chiba’s Specialties, Dance and—!?”

“Festivaaaaaaaaaaaaaals!”

Was that slogan getting around...?

“If we’re all fellow fools, let’s dance and——!?”

“Sing a soooooooooooooong!!”

In response to Meguri-senpai’s mysterious call and response, the students went ballistic.

And without delay, dancing music exploded.

It was the start of the opening act. “This is a jointed effort between the dance association and the cheerleading squad,” Meguri-senpai continued with her enthusiastic microphone act while the students on the stage danced, joked with each other, and flung their arms around, kindling the flames of excitement.

...Wow, so stupid. Our school is really stupid.

What the heck is this about “culturing”? Yeah right.

Oops. I couldn’t keep watching them forever.

Work, work...

[——This is the PA. The song will be wrapping up soon.]

A report came from the PA system.

[——Understood. Chairman Sagami, standby.]

Yukinoshita who listened to the report gave one of her own after. That cue should’ve also been transmitted to the host, Meguri-senpai, as well.

The dance team exited to the left of the stage and Meguri-senpai on the right called out, “Next, we’ll have a word from the chairman of the Cultural Festival planning committee.”

Sagami had a stiff expression as she walked to the center of the stage. Gazes numbering over a thousand were directed at her all at once.

Before she was able to reach the taped center, her legs froze in place. Her hand that held onto the wireless microphone was trembling.

Once she managed to raise her stiff arm, she spoke into the microphone.

In that moment, an ear-splitting *EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEENG* howled out.

It was so on point that the audience burst into laughter.

I knew from the start they didn’t mean any harm from laughing. After all, I’ve been living my entire life being laughed at. I could tell the difference between types of laughter easily with my skin alone.

But for Sagami who stood stock-still on the stage trying to bear with her nervousness and isolation, I doubt the thought even crossed her mind.

Even after the howling subsided, she still didn’t say anything.

Meguri-senpai gripped her microphone anxiously and covered for her, “...Okay, one more time. Planning committee chairman, your words please!”

Her voice caused Sagami to restart into action and she opened the cue card she had been squeezing the entire time. Her fingertips easily slipped against the card. The cue card dropped with a *puff*, inviting more laughter from the crowd.

With a completely flushed expression, Sagami picked up the card from the ground. Irresponsible words, “Do your best!” were yelled out from the audience. They likely didn’t mean any harm. But I don’t think it would serve as encouragement for her either. To those experiencing misery, there aren’t any words you could tell them. All they really want is for everything to be as silent as an inorganic object. They just want to be left alone like the wayside pebble.

Although Sagami’s opening speech was jotted down on the cue cards, she flubbed her lines regardless, stammering forward.

As the time keeper, I signaled to her to wrap up her speech by rotating my arms in a circle since she had gone over the expected time. Sagami, however, didn’t notice my signal and was on the verge of breaking down.

[—Hikigaya-kun. Signal to wrap it up.]

Yukinoshita’s voice mixed with static spoke to me. I glanced at the PA system room on the second floor and Yukinoshita was looking at me with crossed arms.

[—I’ve been doing it for a while now. Doesn’t look like she can see me though.]

[—I see... I may have made a mistake with your assignment.]

[——Is that a jab at my lack of presence?]

[——Oh, I didn't say anything of the sort. More importantly, where are you?
In the audience?]

[totally are jabbing at me. Actually, aren't you looking at me right now?]

I reflexively answered back. It was possible my beginning words may not have gotten picked up by the intercom.

[——Um, vice-chair? Everyone's listening...]

I could hear a very discrete voice from the intercom.

...Right. The intercom was open to everyone, wasn't it? I just made an incredibly, scathing embarrassing memory.

A few seconds later after a planning committee member had called us out, a noise filled my earphones.

[——.....We'll continue with the schedule as planned. Everyone should keep that in mind.]

After a lengthy pause, she stated and ceased all communication henceforth.

The opening ceremony finally ended with the chairman's opening speech and we moved on to the next stage.

It was an opening full of poor prospects.

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It was finally the start of the Cultural Festival after the opening ceremony.

The Cultural Festival was going to be held for two days, but was only open to the general public on the second day. The first day was in-house only.

This would be my second Cultural Festival at this school, but there wasn't anything worth mentioning. It was just your typical Cultural Festival.

Every class held their exhibitions, the cultural clubs held demonstrations and performances, and the volunteers played in a band.

Food and beverages that weren't exactly prepared by actual cooking were sold as if this trending. Sleeping at school to prepare for the festival also stopped being allowed.

But people were still getting excited regardless, so the Cultural Festival itself was really something. People were enjoying the "Cultural Festival" as an icon; in other words, they were enjoying it for its abnormality from their daily, not so much for its scale and quality.

That's what you could expect from a festival.

Naturally, the fervent enthusiasm also made its way to my class, 2-F.

Battles of solicitation immediately littered the hallway and passing through would have been quite the endeavor. Leaflets were distributed, groups with sign on

sticks marched on, and people in party-catered outfits bought from some Don Quijote store were running amok. *Wow, talk about annoying.*

I went back to my classroom after finishing up the cleanup for the opening ceremony. When I made it back, the inside was in a state of chaos. Everyone was in the middle of making the finishing touches for their very first performance.

“What’s with the make-up!? What are you doing!? The grease paint’s too thin!”

“The heck, are you freaking out? You’re *soo* funny, like really. Everyone’s coming just to see Hayato anyway. Shouldn’t you, like, chill out?”

Ebina-san roared out angrily while Miura gave a pep chat to one person after the other. Her words were pretty mean, but it looked like everyone was starting to relax.

I looked around at my classmates and they were all diligently engrossed in their jobs. Did everyone get closer with each other in this past month and a half?

They would laugh, they would cry... Maybe they would even yell at each other... They were just one step away from breaking out into a fist fight, but even so, they would notice each other’s true feelings and finally become one... maybe... Well, not that I would know since I wasn’t there.

I had nothing to do, so I loitered near the entrance of the classroom, pretending to be extremely busy while mumbling “oh yeah, right...”

“You’ve been pretending to work for a while now, but could it be you have nothing to do?” They were words you would hear directly from the mouth of your boss. I turned around and standing there was indeed, *the* boss, well, the boss of the Cultural Festival, Ebina-san. “If you don’t have anything to do, can you handle the reception? Or do *YOU* want to be a part of the play?”

Nope, nope. I answered with the shaking of my head.

“Okay, reception it is. Let people know what the times are for the performance. All you need to do is just answer whatever you’re asked.”

“Wait, I don’t even know the times of the play or anything else.”

“That’s okay. They’re posted at the entrance. But it’d be kind of lame if there wasn’t anyone sitting at the front. Anyway, it’s fine if you just sit there.”

Seriously, *just* sitting? What kind of dream job is this? I want to make the best of this experience and use it as leverage for my future occupation.

I went ahead and left the classroom as she suggested and surely enough, there was a folded long table along with two-legged and three-legged pipe chairs on the floor. Hmph. Let’s get these set up.

I unfolded the long table and propped it on its legs and then I expanded the pipe chair; job complete. That was pointlessly cool! It might’ve been my nature as a guy, but I really liked going through these types of transformations. I also liked

disassembling things too. Occasionally in class, I would take my pencil apart and put it back together.

There was a poster detailing the time schedule of the performance on the wall in large letters. If it was immediately next to me, then I don't think anyone would bother asking me anything.

It was just five minutes until show time. As I was sitting idly, class 2-F grew one level louder in the classroom. I took a peek inside wondering what may have happened.

"Aww yeah! Let's huddle up!" said Tobe.

Everyone grumbled "no way" and "seriously?" but still began forming the circle. Had this been recreation time, then it would've looked like they were going to start playing "Whatever Basket"³.

"Ya know what, we ain't getting' anywhere unless Ebina-san gets this goin'. C'mon, over here. Straight to the center!"

There's no concept of a center in a huddle, I thought, but Tobe was actually indicating the spot next to him. It was a position where he could be justified in linking shoulders with Ebina-san. You've got some spunk, Tobe. You're a formidable strategist.

Then, Miura pulled Ebina-san's arm inwards as if supporting that strategist. "C'mon, Ebina. Get your butt in there."

She was pushed inside of the huddle and she was exactly in the middle. The heart of the huddle. Everyone encircled Ebina-san. Tobe, *sniff*.

Ebina-san spun around and looked at everyone. Her eyes then stopped at a single point.

"C'mon Kawasaki-san, you too."

"M-Me? I'm fine here..."

"Gosh, there you go again. You need to take responsibility since you're the one who made the outfits, okay?"

"Huh...? Weren't you the one that said you would do that?" Kawasaki complained as she walked towards the huddle.

Once everyone, except for me, had gathered, Yuigahama looked over her shoulder at me. I smiled and shook my head at her. Her face then turned into an upset pout.

I'm fine here, jeez. I was better off not joining. It would be more awkward letting me in there when I didn't even do anything for the class than just leaving me out of it entirely.

If I couldn't be confident about standing along them, then it would be better for me to stay out of it. I mean, look at Sagami. She looked a little ashamed too, you know?

Sagami didn't have a very cheerful expression in that huddle. She was probably still hung up on her earlier blunder, but it might also be because she was concerned about her own lack of participation.

People accustomed to assigning ranks to people do so for all manners of things. Sagami at this very moment was reflecting on her own rank. And I think the manifestation of that rank lied with the person who was far from Miura, Hayama, and the others, and wasn't within her direct line of sight, offset to the side.

Mental distance is something that manifests itself in reality.

In which case, Ebina-san, currently the center of everyone, was without a doubt the very heart of the Cultural Festival.

After Ebina-san shouted out, everyone followed.

Surprisingly, it wasn't all that bad of a feeling watching the completed huddle from outside.

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The classroom was enclosed with blackout curtains and was filled to the brim.

Ebina-san concluded that they couldn't fit any more customers and instructed me to place a note on the door indicating the class was full and that no more people could be accepted.

After placing the note, I relocated the long table to the front of the door to keep any more people from entering.

I peeked through the small opening of the door inside the ventilated classroom.

It was finally time for the curtains to ascend above the stage.

The opening act of the play started off with a monologue from the "narrator" performed by Hayama.

The spotlight beamed down on Hayama.

The audience instantly broke into excitement. It looked like the audience had consisted mostly of Hayama's friends and his fans.

Against the desert background was a plane prop. The picture that the "narrator" drew was reenacted in real time by a group of guys in cartoonish outfits upon their appearance on stage. Two of them acted out the illustration of an animal being choked by a boa constrictor. That comical scene was met with abrupt laughter from the audience.

Hayama's long monologue continued further.

And there, "Excuse me, can you draw me a picture of a sheep?" Totsuka's shadow uttered his line.

“Eh? What was that?” Hayama overlooked that small muttering voice.

Totsuka repeated his line once again, “Draw me a picture of a sheep please.”

Then, the spotlight highlighted Totsuka who was standing at the wing of the stage. His adorable outfit and appearance saw another lively reaction from the audience.

Now that the two had finally met, the story moved forward.

When the “little prince” began retelling his stories of his time with a rose back on his home planet, a guy wearing full-body green tights and a red shampoo hat narrated with an effeminate tone.

It got much worse from there. A majority of the stories of the “little prince” visiting the numerous asteroids were visually handled as small skits.

The desperate king who sought to exhibit his authority as well as preserve it was wrapped with numerous, extravagant rugs brought in from various houses. Yamato was in agony from the heat.

The vain man who bawled over wanting people’s admiration and acknowledgment was wrapped in aluminum foil. Tobe’s entire body was dazzling.

The drunkard who drank to forget his shame of drowning in alcohol was surrounded by 1-sho bottles and packs of Onikoroshi “Demon Slayer”. Oda or Tahara or whatever was so red from stage fright that it looked like he was actually drinking alcohol.

The businessman recited numbers and shouted aloud, “Look, I’m someone important, alright!” Due to Ebina-san’s good guidance, the suit the class officer was wearing suited him quite well.

The lamplighter who was devoted to his duty and was constantly switching his lamp on and his was clad in a jump suit that looked dirty and stained. The one going around the lamp set was the opportunist Ooka, which actually might have fit him quite well.

The geographer, who had never set foot out of his study, writes down only what he was told from explorers but knew nothing, was surrounded with maps and globes. Oda or Tahara or whatever was reading books, giving the impression of a scholar.

Through the exchange of ideas between everyone (probably) and Kawasaki doing her best (surely), the resulting outfits were a seemingly big hit with the audience (hurray).

And then, on the stage, the “little prince” descended onto Earth.

The little prince landed in the desert, encountered a snake, and came across numerous roses. It was then the little prince realized that the things he had in his possession were, in fact, nothing at all.

The audience sniffed to Totsuka's extremely sad lines. Since Totsuka was so cut—since the little prince was so pitiful, even I wanted to rush over and give the little guy a hug.

It was there a man wearing a coat with a fox mask appeared.

—Oh, this is a scene that I like.

The little prince invited the fox.

“Come and play with me. I'm terribly sad right now...”

Totsuka stated his line with a downcast look. Oh yes, that's really good. By the way, the first manuscript that Ebina-san wrote had it so the scenario had him ask “do you want to do it?”⁴ instead. What the heck was she thinking...?

The fox answered the little prince.

“I can't play with you... I am not tame.”

The line, “I am not tame” grabbed my attention. It was a line that concisely and realistically encompassed the idea of “getting along”.

To get along is essentially a situation where numerous things are tamed, tamed in such a way that allows you to get along with someone, or even everyone, without causing any problems. At some point, even your circumstances and your mind start becoming tamed. Your fangs are ripped out, your claws are broken, and your thorns are plucked out. You would be treated carefully, as if trying to touch a tumor without hurting it, or even be able to hurt it. This satirical interpretation towards “getting along” was something I was fond of.

The scene transitioned to the next as I was in the middle of my thoughts.

“First, you will sit down a short distance away from me, like this, in the grass. I will watch you out of the corner of my eye and you will say nothing; words are the source of misunderstandings, after all.”

The little prince and the fox went through dialogue after dialogue.

And then, the both of them tamed each other.

But their departure eventually visited them.

For a parting gift, the fox left the little prince with a secret. This was likely the scene that made “The Little Prince” incredibly famous.

—What is essential is invisible to the eye.

After the departure of the fox, the little prince visited several more places and the stage returned back to the desert again.

The “narrator” and the little prince searched all over the desert for a well.

“What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.”

The audience let out a gasp to Totsuka's line. This was also a line representative of "The Little Prince". There were probably a lot of people who knew it.

Eventually, the "narrator" and the little prince who went through many conversations, spent a lot of time together, and joined their hearts had to part as well. By the way, the first manuscript that Ebina-san wrote had it where the scenario added "lips and bodies pressed against each other". Really, what is wrong with her...?

"Little prince... I really like how you laugh..."

Hayama's line caused the girls to scream. I think a MP3 recording of the line could've netted me some profits.

"We'll be together forever..."

Another line from Hayama caused the audience to breathe out as if they were being fulfilled. Yeah. We should record a pillow talk CD and include a body pillow. I sense a booming business there.

And finally, it was time for the parting scene.

The little prince was bitten by the snake and collapsed without making a sound. Totsuka's acting that looked like it would disappear without a trace stole the audience's breaths away.

The stage blacked out.

A single beam of the spotlight shined down on Hayama.

The final scene was wrapped up with a monologue from the "narrator".

Once it was over, the audience gave a thundering round of applause.

In commemoration, the very first performance of the LittleMusical (Musical "The Little Prince") ended with full seats.

In any case, you couldn't exactly call this a musical. It was more like a play... They didn't even sing or dance.

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The door of the classroom was closed whenever there wasn't a performance.

It looked like being the receptionist also meant being the house-sitter as I was sitting on a pipe chair at the entrance of our class while my classmates were taking a break or visiting other class exhibitions.

Tomorrow, I had to go around school for my planning committee job as an assistant historian, so today was the only day I could participate in class. Unable to contribute to the initial class preparations and with all of tomorrow being booked, it was only fair I was stuck here all day today. Heck, I wanted to thank my classmates instead if they went through the trouble of preparing and approving this job for me and considering it as a form of class participation.

Well, people *that* considerate were a dime a dozen though. I had an idea of who could have suggested such an idea.

“Nice job.”

A plastic bag was placed on the desk with a *thump*. I looked up to find Yuigahama.

She took a pipe chair leaning against the wall, unfolded it, and dropped onto it with an “ooph”. Are you an old lady or something?

“So, how was it?”

“Seemed okay, I guess? The audience seemed to like it at least.”

Putting aside the fact it couldn’t be considered as a complete play, it did its job well in riling up the audience. Ebina-san’s super producer vision was still a mystery to me, but I think the play was able to establish itself as entertainment, incorporating Tobe’s idea of “fun”.

There really wasn’t any reason to complain, especially since it was something out of a high school Cultural Festival. Making people with an expansive social network like Hayama, Tobe, and Oooka a part of the cast wasn’t an act of favorites, since I think they were able to maximize the amount of excitement in their respective circles.

Seeing someone you got along with act out a different character, and then, seeing that person leak out his usual character was another type of fun altogether they could create compared to what they already deemed to be fun.

With that in mind, the musical could be considered decent. More importantly, it was because Totsuka was cute.

“Everyone really did put a lot of time into it,” Yuigahama said as she was stretching her body and bending her back with a groan. Her emotional tone conveyed all the hardship they had to deal with up to this day. You guys did a good job, really... Anyway, stop stretching backwards like that with that T-shirt, I can’t help but notice your chest and navel.

“Well, I figured. I’m sure they all did. But I wasn’t there so I wouldn’t know.”

“Well duh, you were in the planning committee. A-Also... are you bothered at all about being left out of that first huddle we did?” Yuigahama pressed her index fingers together and looked up at me. This was one of her habits whenever she asked something sensitive. She was worrying about pointless things again.

“No, not really. Besides, I didn’t even do anything, so it wouldn’t be right to include me.” It didn’t change the fact that she was being considerate of me. I answered her honestly which was rare for me.

Yuigahama sighed with a renounced smile. “...I knew you’d say that.”

“Huh, how...?”

It's a little embarrassing if you knew what I was going to say, please stop.

Yuigahama leaned back against the backboard of her pipe chair and its squeaking resembled an embarrassed laugh.

"Duh. I mean, you're serious about the weirdest things. I can tell just from watching you."

"What, you're watching me...?"

The pipe chair then squeaked in surprise. When I looked, Yuigahama had stood up half way and was waving her hand in front of her chest. "Ah, just kidding. Forget I said that just now. I'm not watching you at all. What I meant was I look away *a lot*."

"Uh, it's not like you can't or anything..." I scratched my head in response.

We both went silent. In that time, the noise from the two neighboring classes grew conspicuously loud.

It sounded like class 2-E and 2-G were a big hit.

In particular, class 2-E. They had some sort of jet coaster attraction and there was a long queue for it.

People unable to deal with the long wait started complaining and the students of class 2-E weren't sure how to deal with them.

As strange as it is, lines typically attracted more lines. This wasn't limited to just lines. Things that were selling sold even more. The very fact that it was selling doubled as advertisement which led to even more sales.

Class 2-E's situation was no exception as seen from the growing tail of the line.

"Wow, that looks rough," Yuigahama gasped.

"Things are going to become unmanageable if that keeps going, won't it?"

From what I could see, class 2-E didn't have enough people so they couldn't process the line fast enough. It was only a matter of time before the hallway was a congested mess.

It was at that moment.

Breeeeeet—a high-pitched sound could be heard.

I looked in its direction and Meguri-senpai was there.

"Everyone, get on it," Meguri-senpai said even though there was no one present. Suddenly, the other student council members appeared. They proceeded to organize the line and relocate the rest of the people in the back elsewhere. Are you guys the staff at comiket or something?

“Is class 2-E’s representative here?” Yukinoshita was mixed in there as well. She promptly summoned the class representative, listened to the circumstances, and went over how to deal with the situation.

“Yukinon’s so cool...”

“Sure. The guy from 2-E obviously looks really scared though...”

To us, Yukinoshita was like her usual self, but to the people who weren’t familiar with her, her cold intensity was frightening.

“But she looks a lot better now.”

“...That’s true.”

Yukinoshita let out a small breath after finishing the discussion about the countermeasures with the representative. When she lifted her face, her gaze was directed my way for just a moment. But she quickly averted her eyes and walked away. She probably had another job to deal with.

As we watched her leave, I spoke to Yuigahama sitting next to me, “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Hm? What is it?” Yuigahama rested her chin in both of her hands on the desk and answered without turning.

“When we went to Yukinoshita’s place last time, did you guys talk about something?” I asked.

Yuigahama mumbled while thinking and then spoke, “Nothing at all.”

“Huh?” I asked for an explanation with a gesture.

Yuigahama then narrated the continuation of that day. “This was after you went home, Hikki. We got hungry, so we ate dinner together. Then we watched some kind of DVD. After that, I went home... So I didn’t ask her anything you wanted to know, Hikki.”

Her last sentence was almost as if she was refusing to say.

“...Well, it’s not like there’s anything I wanted to know.”

“Really? I wanted to know some things though.”

“Huh? So why—“

—*didn’t you ask her?* I tried to ask, but when I looked at Yuigahama’s profile, my voice withered away. Her expression as she watched Yukinoshita in the distance turn the corner of the hallway was so sincere that I hesitated from going any further.

“You see, I’m going to wait for Yukinon. I think she’s trying her best to talk to us and get closer to us... That’s why I’m going to wait for her.”

It was an answer you could expect from Yuigahama.

Yuigahama would definitely wait. It's because she had been trying to get closer all this time. Yukinoshita fully understood this and that's why she was trying to respond back by trying to take a step forward herself.

"But I won't wait for people that aren't going anywhere."

"Huh? Well yeah, there's no point in waiting for a person like that."

Yuigahama smiled lightly. With her cheeks cupped in her hands, she slightly twisted her body my way.

In front of the idling class, the traffic of people accelerated. Students walking in the hallway were going back and forth, heading for their next destination or trying to solicit more customers. The commotion didn't need to discriminate between every individual in a frantic rush nor us. It was just one with the background, the sounds of the environment.

That's why I could hear her voice so clearly, a voice that was much more soothing and mature than normal.

"That's not it. I won't wait... but I'll go instead."

My heart jumped. It was a pain that could away at me internally.

When I looked at Yuigahama's moist eyes, it made me want to think about the meaning of those words. But if I were to think about them, I will be at a dead end. And ultimately, I will likely be mistaken. I've come this far being mistaken about a lot of things. But this time, I don't want to be mistaken, I'm sure.

That's why I didn't have the words needed to answer her at this moment.

"Really..."

"Uh huh, really."

I gave her a meaningless and vague response and Yuigahama returned a shy smile. Her embarrassed smile was telling me that the discussion was over.

Both of us let out a small sigh and averted our gazes.

It was then my eyes spotted a plastic bag resting on the table.

"Anyway, what's with the bag?"

"Oh, I forgot. You didn't eat lunch yet, right?"

She shuffled through the bag and took out a paper pack. She then took out something from inside that pack. *Huh. That's one weird matryoshka item.* I thought, but apparently it was something else.

It was like, bread or something. A plump, rectangular loaf of bread.

It was plastered with fresh cream mixed, dressed in chocolate syrup with colorful, chocolate sprinkles. But it was essentially bread. A plump, rectangular loaf of bread even. Then again, this was *just* a loaf of bread. Cooking? More like a loaf of bread.

But Yuigahama proudly lifted up that loaf of bread ON THE FRESH CREAM⁵.

“Tada! Honey toast!”

...Ooh, so this was the rumored popular honey toast at “Everyone’s Favorite Karaoke Pasela”⁶... Is this the collaboration menu or something? Am I wrong? It’s not a collaboration? Are we not going to get a drink and coaster specially made for us? Karatetsu⁷ is welcomed too!

I looked at it with a mildly passionate gaze. It might’ve been because of that that Yuigahama said tiredly, “It’s not that big of a deal. They have this at Pasela in Chiba too.”

“Uh, I don’t exactly go out to karaoke, you know.”

But in the hands of an amateur, this was the kind of quality you could expect for honey toast. Obviously, an actual pro would make it more authentic. I mean, this was just bread, seriously. Couldn’t they put in a little more effort in making it look less like bread? It’s literally bread. Absolutely bread.

“Yoink,” Yuigahama let out an energetic yap you wouldn’t expect from her when distributing food and she apportioned the food onto paper plates. So you’re doing it bare handed... Well, that’s fine too.

I took a bite of the torn piece of honey toast.

“So good!” Yuigahama stuffed her face, chewing with fresh cream dabbed on her face. She must be a sweets person. She looked pretty happy.

As I was watching her expression, I was starting to get the feeling I might end up liking the honey toast myself.

I carried a piece to my mouth in anticipation.

...This bread is so hard... The honey hasn’t even soaked in all the way yet.

There wasn’t enough fresh cream on it, so this must have been some kind of slow-inducing punishment game halfway in... Yuigahama’s idea of choosing this for lunch was pretty dangerous too.

But the person in question seemed satisfied. Was there anything good about this?

“The fresh cream is so good!”

Hey... Wait... Is fresh cream even necessary on honey toast? You stole some from my portion too, didn’t you?

I thought I'd give her an earful, but I restrained myself since Yuigahama was enjoying it. We finished it off with tea, making it a complete meal.

...Yeah, well. I guess it's good, maybe?

Yuigahama finished her food and wiped away the cream at her mouth with a tissue. Her lips were glossy. The sunlight reflecting against them was bright. I ended up averting my eyes as a result.

The honey toast was pretty big even though there were two of us eating it. Well, *it was* an entire loaf of bread...

It had to have been expensive then. It was nothing like a burrito.

"Oh yeah, how much was it?" I took out my wallet and asked.

Yuigahama stopped me. "It's okay. It wasn't much."

"No, I can't have that."

"I said it's fine!" Yuigahama stubbornly refused. At this rate, we'd go back and forth...

"I may have the desire to be raised, but I don't intend to take charity!"

"What's with that bizarre pride of yours!?"

Yuigahama groaned and took some time to think. She then whispered quietly, "Jeez. You're such a pain, Hikki... Fine. Why don't you treat me to honey toast next time then...? Say, Chiba's Pasela."

"You're going to choose the place too....?" I spoke bitterly, but even I knew what the meaning behind that was.

Because of that, I found myself gauging my distance with Yuigahama again.

I really do think we've gotten closer compared to before. I'm not so immature that I would deny that fact out of desperation.

It was like that for the written application too. If it was just filling it in, I really could have just asked anyone.

But I went out of my way to find Yuigahama and even relied on her.

I was allowing that.

It was really easy to rely on Yuigahama.

However.

That's exactly why I needed to keep myself in check.

To blindly place unrestrained faith in someone is dependence.

I mustn't rely on Yuigahama's kindness. I mustn't let Yuigahama's good will spoil me.

Her kindness was something that created painful memories, made you worry and agonize over them, and wring them out. And I knew all of that. That's why I mustn't place my trust in her so easily.

On the slim chance that all of that weren't due to her kindness or good will, but due to much more different emotions, then I had to be even more careful. Because that was simply taking advantage of a person's weakness.

Feelings should be managed appropriately.

Distances should be maintained suitably.

——So is it okay for me to take at least one step forward again?

The Cultural Festival is a festival. A festival is extraordinary.

It's that extraordinariness that causes your judgment to be off more than normal. But well, I'm sure even I would make the wrong judgment, at least for today.

“...Can we do another place?”

“Uh huh, sure,” Yuigahama smiled. “So when should we do it?”

There was a strange intensity behind her smile.

“U-Um, I'm sorry. May I just have a little more time to think it over...?” I found myself speaking politely.

Yuigahama replied back with a reluctant sigh to my answer.

There was just one day left of the Cultural Festival.

However, without a doubt, the end will come.

The clock that continues to tick moment by moment was indicating that even this moment, too, will eventually end.

HIKIGAYA HOUSEHOLD

THE FIRST NIGHT
OF THE CULTURAL
FESTIVAL

Ah, you're looking up something on the computer again. What is it this time?

Well, you know... Hey, if someone asked you to go hang out somewhere, where would you go?

I think Destinyland would be your safest bet. There's also Lalapo.

That's standard for Chiba people... Anything else?

Mother Farm?

Huh? Mother Farm's okay? How about Narita Dream Farm?

Oh totally! There's also Tokyo German Village!

There's Funabashi Andersen Park too.

Ostrich Kingdom!

Oh yeah? Then I'll go with Ichihara Elephant Kingdom.

Dang onii-chan, you're as good as ever. Okay, I'll go with Kamkawa's Sea World!

For aquariums, Kasai Seaside Park is pretty close... It's in the Tokyo Metropolitan area though.

I think aquariums are pretty good. There's the zoo too.

Chiba Zoological Park.

Yep, yep. They have an amusement park. And they have a rollercoaster too.

Did they have amazing stuff like that there?

Yep, it's on the way there.

That's the Chiba Monorail. You're right though, riding it is pretty scary, but also fun. The new railroad car models are also cool.

The Chiba Monorail is number one in the wooooooooooooooooooooorld!!

As a suspended railway, the distance it covers during service is the highest in the world, after all.

There are a lot of places for family trips and dates. Yep, in Chiba that is....! What were we talking about again?

What? A Chiba CM, right?

Chapter 8

Ahead is the person **Yukinoshita Yukino** is gazing at.

The Cultural Festival reached the second day.

The second day, today, was open to the general public which meant a large volume of visitors: folks in the neighborhood, friends from other schools, and students looking to test into this school. There were also many people who had the Saturday off, so the event saw quite the turnout.

Compared to the first day, trouble arose accordingly just for the rehearsal-like atmosphere and the in-house excitement.

But on the second day where the entire planning committee's support was in effect, it was safe, heavy day1 or not. They even had feather pads too.

With that out of the way, planning committee work was going to occupy me for all of today.

The event saw a variety of customers with the students from nearby middle schools being prominent: family accompanies, madams, neighborhood elders, and "I dunno what's going on here, but I came anyway" little kids.

For the most part, we needed to record down all the visitors, but from what I could see, that was a fool's errand. Quite frankly, I had the feeling I'd be left as unchecked, what with my lack of presence in class.

The health division that was on duty worked with a male gym teacher to handle the reception at the front of school before the two gates by setting up a long table. So there shouldn't be any suspicious people coming on to campus.

Within the ongoing chaos, my job in particular was to take pictures.

Today's main task was to capture the sight of every class exhibition and how the visitors were feeling, photos that would preserve the excitement of this year's Cultural Festival.

Photography. I figured I could finish off the job with random shots of things here and there, but somehow, I wasn't making much progress.

The reason being? Whenever I was ready to take a shot, people would tell me, "Um... could you please, like, stop taking pictures?" It was kind of painful...

And each time, I would end up showing my armband indicating "Planning Committee – Historian", and for some reason, start apologizing.

Once I was finally able to manage a few shots, my back received a sudden impact from behind.

"Onii-chan!"

“Ohh, Komachi.”

When I turned around, Komachi was hugging me. For her to be so affectionate with me, it wasn't such a bad feeling as the older brother. Uwaha², my little sister's soooo cute~.

“A hug after our long-awaited reunion... This might just be full of Komachi points.”

“What's that about? Are we at the Heathrow Airport or something?”

I thought foreigners at airports gave out way too many hugs.

Komachi was being awfully pushy, so I peeled her off of me. She then let out a “yeow” with a sly voice.

It should've been Komachi's day off, but she was in her school uniform. On that note, why did high school girls always wear their uniforms anyway? Like, today was a weekend, but the event was just full of people in their uniforms. Then again, maybe it was easier if you didn't have to think about what to wear and just opted for your uniform.

Komachi fixed her sailor uniform's collar that got disheveled from jumping onto me. I had a strange sense of discomfort from seeing her.

Right. It was because everyone here had come with others while she was here alone, so I felt something was off.

“Did you come by yourself?”

“Yep. I'm really only here to see you, onii-chan. That was worth a lot of Komachi points,” But noticing my cold stare, Komachi then purposely cleared her throat. “Well, actually, inviting my friends when they're so nervous about the upcoming test season would've been a little awkward.”

Speaking of which, I had completely forgotten due to how dumb she was, but this was Komachi we're talking about; right now, she's a test-taking student. Sobu High also happened to be her number one choice too.

Well, if it's just to come see the school you wanted to get into, then the Cultural Festival would definitely serve as encouragement. But at the same time, it could also place a lot of pressure on you. But she still went out of her way to come with those implications in mind.

Komachi looked around restlessly as if finding the area unusual. “Where's Yui-san and Yukino-san?”

“I think Yuigahama's back at the class. No clue about Yukinoshita.”

“Why aren't you at class, onii-chan? Don't have a place there?”

She nonchalantly said something cruel just now. Rude. I, too, had a place. And that place was the table and chair specifically assigned just for me. But since my

desk was suspended during the time of the Cultural Festival, I was a complete vagrant. A wanderer.

“...A wandering and forlorn soul deems a shelter to which he belongs unnecessary.”

“Wow, so cool,” And she answered with a totally monotone voice. “So, what’cha doing?”

“Work...” I answered.

Komachi blinked her eyes two to three times. “So, what’cha doing?”

“I said work.”

Why the heck did she repeat the question? Don’t make me write “Let’s listen to what people are saying, okay?” under “Progress” on your report card.

“So, what’cha doing?”

“Are you some kind of skipping CD? Don’t make me wipe you down with a cleaning solution. I’m working, seriously.”

“Onii-chan, is working...” Komachi muttered emotively, finally understanding what I had said after the third time.

“My onii-chan can’t hold a part-time job long enough, usually slacks off, and makes the most ridiculous excuses like “ah, it’s just my parents are pretty gung-ho about my tests” and just quits. For that onii-chan, to actually be working...” A momentary flash of light could be seen in her eyes. “You don’t know how happy I am... But, wait, that’s weird. It’s like my onii-chan’s going far away, so I don’t know how to explain this complicated feeling.”

Hey, could you stop with those parental eyes? It’s incredibly embarrassing. At this rate, onii-chan’s going to do a complete 180 on his entire life and live earnestly for the sake of his family.

To shake off Komachi’s heartwarming gaze, I corrected her understanding of my actual situation. “Well, you know, I say working, but it’s really just one of those underling jobs where I run around. Basically, it’s a job that anyone can do in my place.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Darn brat, she’s nodding too much. A bitter smile spilled out on my face.

“I know. It makes sense to me too.”

I must’ve been sporting quite the face of an underling if Hayama and even my little sister were convinced of that. But don’t get me wrong, I think my eyes belonged to the underlings of pirates, robbers, and bandits.

Komachi and I took our time going down the hallway.

In the considerable crowd, Komachi went a few steps further to look at the class decorations and student uniforms and looked surprised at their energy.

She let out an impressed gasp. "...High schools really are different, huh?"

"Well, middle schools don't have Cultural Festivals."

"Right, right. We just have chorus contests."

That phrase caused an unpleasant memory to flash by in my head.

Why the heck did those guys immediately judge someone as not singing? I totally was, damn it. Or what? Was it because they didn't know what my voice sounded like since we never had a conversation before? Was it because my voice was treated as a ghost's voice after the recording?

Komachi's legs then went to a stop.

She did an exaggerated stretch, placed her hand on her brow and looked into the distance. Or so I thought, but she was crossing her arms and thinking.

"I'm gonna go look around. I'll see you later, onii-chan." Before she even finished speaking, she jogged to the bend in the hallway and ascended up the stairs.

"R-Right..."

Suddenly, I was left alone. I replied with a dumbfounded answer despite knowing it wouldn't reach her. Girls from another school that were walking nearby jumped back fifty centimeters in surprise.

I had to say though. My little sister was quite the strange girl.

Komachi was a girl who made sure to stay in line with her surroundings, but she was also surprisingly fond of doing things alone. She was a hybrid loner model of the next generation. Komachi had a knack for learning from the failures of those above. Growing up while watching a specialized isolationist like me, she was able to understand its merits and demerits.

Well, brothers and sisters had a lot going on with them.

If the older brother, like me, was just a failed piece of work by general standards, then the little sister unexpectedly had it a lot easier.

She wouldn't have to agonize over being compared to him.

However, if I were an exceedingly excellent individual, then how would Komachi see me?

The reason I found myself pondering over that might have been because, walking ahead of me, I saw her.

Even in this crowd of people, I could tell.

Yukinoshita Yukino went to one class to the next, taking her time gazing into them.

Her gaze was slightly softer than usual.

Regardless of the reasons and details behind the Cultural Festival, it was thanks to Yukinoshita that it was turning out so smoothly. Most likely, she was

aware of that, and proud of it. The fact that you tried so hard and something came out of it was definitely something that would cause your gaze to look kinder.

Yukinoshita's gaze continued to the next class.

And then, it looked like her gaze had captured my figure.

She made a slightly shocked expression, but her gaze became cold. *Why?* With a suspicious glint in her eyes, she briskly walked over.

"It looks like you're alone today."

"Well, nothing unusual. Oh, Komachi was with me earlier though."

"I see, so Komachi came by too. You aren't going around together?"

"She kind of ran off somewhere. Maybe she's just being considerate since I'm working?"

"...Working?" Yukinoshita tilted her head with a puzzled look.

"You can't tell..?"

"That's why I'm asking," said Yukinoshita, nonchalantly.

So you can't tell if I'm working huh...? I, Hachiman, was just a little shocked. But speaking of which, it's true that I wasn't doing any work right now...

"Anyway, you? Working?"

"Yes. I'm going around checking the classes."

"You didn't do that yesterday? What about your class?"

"...I would rather be doing this than participate in *that* back at class," Yukinoshita answered, looking remarkably sullen.

Oh right, I think she said class 2-J was doing a fashion show. Class 2-J, the International Education course, was comprised of more than ninety percent girls. If they wanted the fastest way to attract customers, then all they needed to do was showcase and emphasize their beauty. In that case, it was natural they would want to recruit Yukinoshita. Wow, she definitely would hate that. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want a small glimpse of Yukinoshita being forced into a gorgeous outfit all the while trying to refuse them.

Yukinoshita was still in the middle of her patrol, so she was paying constant, close attention to various places.

Her gaze stopped at a single class.

"...That class. What they're doing is different from what's written on their application."

On the wall of the third year class 3-B was a signboard designed with cave-like ornaments, and written on it with Indiana Jones-like font was [Train Trolley].

"What were they supposed to do?"

“You should at least have an idea of what all the classes are doing.”

Oh, this girl just went and said something outrageous...

Yukinoshita took out a nicely folded pamphlet of the Cultural Festival from her breast pocket and held it out to me.

I took it wordlessly and opened it. Actually, the residual warmth coming from the pamphlet was getting a rise out of me, so I really wanted her to refrain from that kind of lax behavior.

I searched for the details of class 3-B's exhibition to purge my worldly desires. *Uhhh, 3-B, 3-B...*

There it is. “Display a diorama with ornaments inside using a slowly moving trolley”, it looked like.

But what leaked out from the inside of the room were screaming voices.

And then, intense *clickety-clack* sounds.

It was obviously a roller coaster... It looked like they abruptly changed their focus after hearing the rave reviews of class 2-E's roller coaster. They were quite the opportunists.

But the vice-chairwoman wouldn't allow for that and quickly summoned the representative. “Is the representative here? This isn't what was written on the application.”

The instant she had said that, the complexion on the girls of class 3-B changed.

“Crap!” “We got found out already!” “A-Anyway, get her in there! Let's smooth it over with force!”

The noise turned into the buzzing of a beehive and the senpais tightly grabbed Yukinoshita's arms and dragged her into the trolley.

“H-Hey!” Yukinoshita sent me a look while resisting. It looked like she was asking me to help her.

But that would have the opposite effect right now.

The entire time, I had assimilated with the atmosphere until stares from class 3-B focused on me.

“...Is that part of the planning committee too?” “He has an armband!” “Throw him in there!”

The uncultured male senpais immediately grabbed me. Hey! Why aren't the girl senpais not grabbing me!? Isn't this just unfair!?

I was dragged into the classroom. Hey! Who was that? Who was the one that touched my butt just now!? The inside of the class was designed like the interior of a cave. It was considerably elaborate with minerals lit up by LEDs, crystal skulls, rocks made from styrofoam, and strings laid out all over with bats flying around.

In the brief moment I was impressed, I was pushed into the trolley built from a basket cart, decorated with ornaments. Hey! Really, who was that!? Who's the one that's been rubbing my butt!?

I was pushed with one final shove. The impact caused Yukinoshita and me to be forced into the trolley, and we almost fell on top of each other.

With my last stand of resistance, I was somehow able to avoid crashing into Yukinoshita, but we were put into a cramped position.



...She's so close, she's so close. Yukinoshita and I scooted over to opposite ends of the narrow trolley.

“Umm, thank you very much for taking our train trolley today. Please enjoy the mysterious underground world to your heart's content.”

The trolley jerked into motion once the opening speech ended. Four male students in black outfits with good builds began moving the trolley. On closer inspection, there were two others acting as their support.

The course that was created from desks, long desks, sheets of iron and plates on wooden boards rattled and we moved at a fast pace. Our bodies could feel the trolley being jerked up and down in violent fluctuations.

This is pretty scary... On top of that, the feeling of anxiety from knowing it was actually people causing the motions was no joke...

Suddenly, I could feel something on my blazer. When I looked, Yukinoshita was squeezing the cuffs of my blazer.

With the violent rattling back and forth, occasionally going up and down, I started to understand the feeling of being washed in a laundry machine.

The trolley stopped, finally reaching the goal.

Yukinoshita kept her back pressed against the wall of the trolley, looking relieved.

“So how did you like your trip to the depths of the earth? Come by again anytime~”

When the senpai of 3-B ended the trip with those final words, Yukinoshita and I started moving again. We both looked at each other. Yukinoshita quickly removed her hand from my blazer.

We then left the classroom as if being chased out. Since it was dark inside, the sunlight was bright.

“What do you think of our attraction!?” A person, who had been somewhere at the start, looking like the representative of 3-B appeared and boasted.

Looking somewhat disoriented, Yukinoshita sent him a cold stare. But her wobbling made that lose its intensity.

“There's nothing to think, this is different from what's on your application...”

“It's only a little! We're just exercising our flexible judgment!”

That's called getting carried away... With people like these, even if you were unreasonable with them, they wouldn't listen. The representative wasn't at fault, but this was just the nature of groups. Once they decided on what to do and got started, they wouldn't lend their ears to other people so easily. In that case, this was where we should just regulate the direction that they were going in.

“Well, it looks like a lot of people are enjoying it, so it’s not a big deal. That is, as long as it’s safe,” I said.

Yukinoshita gave it some thought. “I suppose... In that case, please write a supplement application and submit it. Also, provide a thorough explanation for the riders. Please have it at the entrance and in the opening speech before the start of the attraction.”

“Ehh... I guess if it’s just that.”

“Thank you very much,” Yukinoshita bowed and left the place. When she set out, she glanced at me over her shoulder. With an upset expression, she gave me a light glare. As if also because of the pouring sunlight, her cheeks were faintly red. “...Historian, do your work. Or could it be... you need someone to watch you so you don’t slack off?”

“No, I don’t...”

Don’t look down on me. You can watch me all you want, but when it’s time to slack off, I’ll slack off. That’s what makes me, me.

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In the end, I was forcibly placed under Yukinoshita’s scrutiny and with her instructions, I took numerous photos.

Her job of patrolling and my job of taking pictures were being done simultaneously.

Yukinoshita stopped her feet at class 3-E, which wasn’t too far off from the gym.

[Pets of All Sorts Meoow Woooof]

It looked like the students all brought their respective house pets to class.

Pictures of their pets were pasted on the wall as if it was some kind of host club. Dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters were standard, but there were ferrets, stoats, weasels, snakes, turtles... They sure had a lot of varieties with long bodies, but anyway.

Amongst all the photos, Yukinoshita’s gaze was focused on a single one.

Oh? A ragdoll, huh? Ragdolls are a type of cat breed. They’re rather big in size and they have fluffy and hairy fur. There’s also their name, ragdoll. The intended meaning is supposed to be doll; it isn’t referring to an adult doll at all. There are also small breeds like singapura cats and munchkin cats. I may be saying “pura pura” or “munch munch”, but it’s not anything indecent at all.

Yukinoshita was looking inside the classroom and then back at the pictures over and over again.

...Ah. This is hopeless. This is the same hopeless pattern. I can see where this is heading.

“You can just go inside, you know,” I spoke to her, fully aware of how things were going to develop.

But surprisingly, Yukinoshita shook her head in disappointment. “...There are dogs in there.”

Ah, right, she wasn’t any good with dogs, huh? No chance there.

“Also... because, people will see me, so...” said Yukinoshita, looking incredibly embarrassed. She made a red face and looked down.

Well, I guess so. I mean, seeing her act so affectionately with cats was kind of freaky. Instead of going “so cute!” she would be totally and seriously affectionate with them. Heck, she wouldn’t back down ever. Like, it’s to the point she had reached the level of a skilled craftsman. And for the vice-chairwoman of the planning committee to be seen like that, her dignity would instantly be in the dumps.

The conditions were different from a Monster Hunter pet shop, so there wasn’t much she could do. The public eye was there too.

“Well, just go to Carrefour next time. I’d recommend that pet shop over there.”

“I know about it, I go there often.”

Is that so...? So you’ve already been there...

“So we’re done here now, right?”

Yukinoshita, however, didn’t look like she was going to budge. In fact, she was pointing at the door. “Historian, work.”

Are you Mister Popo or something? Stop talking with just your vocabulary.

But, well, Yukinoshita’s iron will with cats in front of her looked immovable that even a lever wouldn’t get her to move.

I gave in and held the photography shoot. That’s good, that’s good! Raise your legs a bit more there.

A few minutes after, I was finally released from the grunt work.

“Hey, is there any point to taking so many cat pictures?”

Well, it’s not a big deal or anything...

Yukinoshita took the digital camera from me and looked it over. She looked over the numerous “meow, meow” photos that I took while she was barking instructions from a distance and went “phew”, smiling with a satisfied expression.

I watched her, thinking how dangerous it was for her to be walking while operating the camera, but since everyone was going in the same direction, strangely enough, I didn’t have to worry about her crashing into people.

Further ahead was the gym. The doors were left open and gathered inside was a considerable amount of people.

With the boisterous sounds of people cheering, Yukinoshita handed me back the camera.

“...It’s almost about time.”

“For?” I asked, but Yukinoshita didn’t answer.

Yukinoshita remained quiet and headed straight for the gym with a decisive gait as though she was going there to search for some kind of answer.

Without turning around, she called my name, “Hikigaya-kun. Let’s get going.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Well, it didn’t really matter where we went since I had my job as the assistant historian, so I had no objection. The vice-chairwoman herself had instructed me to take these pictures, so I shouldn’t be hearing complaints like “we can’t use these!” either. So this made it easier for me as well.

I went through the doors of the gym after Yukinoshita.

All of rows of pipe chairs were occupied.

In the back, there were people next to each other standing and watching. There must’ve been some kind of initial announcement since there were so many people here.

“Ah, Yukinoshita-san. Good timing,” The volunteer in charge of the gym approached us. “We’re having everyone else stand since we don’t have enough chairs, so would it better to organize them into lines?”

“I believe it should be fine.”

“But won’t it get too loud?”

“...It’ll be quiet very soon.”

Sure enough, the noisy atmosphere died down just like Yukinoshita said. Was it because everyone had sensed the performance was about to begin or was it because everyone had been pressured by the dignified classical presence that seeped from the instruments set on the stage?

Before things got started, we made our way to the end of the line of standing viewers. When we reached the end, there was a moment of commotion.

I placed my eyes on the stage and women in magnificent dresses holding various instruments appeared on stage one by one. They were met with applause from the audience.

The one that appeared last, coming out with leisurely footsteps, was Yukinoshita Haruno.

Under the dazzling spotlight, wearing a slender long dress that emphasized the curves of her body, for every step she took, her dark outfit would flutter, mesmerizing those that watched her. The black rose corsage attached to her bosom and to her tied hair had an aura of glamor even from far away and the glimmer of the pearl and spangle further served to make her appear even more radiant.

Haruno-san held the end of her skirt and gracefully bowed.

She ascended onto the rostrum with her high heels and grabbed the baton.

She lightly raised it in the air and stopped. That elegant motion coerced those who watched into restraining themselves.

And like that of a rapier, she sharply swung the baton.

Instantly, a tune filled the gym.

Spewing forth from the brass instruments that shined under the dazzling spotlight was a lump of pressure and from the quivering strings and bows, a timbre with the sharpness of an arrow. In contrast, the timbre of the woodwind instruments trembled like the evening wind.

Haruno-san tore away the space before her.

Then, the violinists stood up and sensationally bowed the strings of their violins.

Next, the instrumentalists playing the flutes, piccolos, and oboes rose, accompanying the light melody, and took a step. Next to stand were the clarinets and fagottos which were raised high in the air. And as if this part was the highlight, the trumpets and trombones were directed upwards, strengthening their shine from the spotlight. When the contrabass was spun, instrumentalists playing the timpani would match with that and make a splendid turn.

It was a spirited musical opening that didn't cohere with their classical attire; all the more so with their unconventional, gaudy, and intense maneuvers.

The audience was shocked as if they were stuck across the side of their face.

But the recognizable rhythm and melody that naturally excited the body and the affinity that the instrumentalists had from their actions caused the audience to lean forward and listen attentively. On realization, everyone had taken up the rhythm to their knees.

What song was it? It's something I've heard before, and I think it was a piece that the wind orchestral club had played quite often.

With my answer lodged in my throat, Haruno-san abruptly lifted her hand in the air and swung them left and right.

In the harmonic orchestra, that motion was abnormal. The attention of the viewers was all focused on that hand. Those thin and long fingers started a countdown.

It was that moment when a familiar phrase flew into my ears. Everyone present, here in the gym, knew exactly what that piece was.

Haruno-san twisted half her body once again. Her baton to the instrumentalists, and her other hand to the audience. She energetically waved her hands.

That signal caused the stage and the audience to jump to their feet in unison and scream.

“Mambo!”

With that ongoing crazy enthusiasm, the performance accelerated.

And once again, another “Mambo!” came like the raging waves.

It was that extremely short instant where you wouldn’t be able to tell apart the orchestra from the audience.

Even the lineup of the old boys and the old girls who should have been retired like Haruno-san followed her instructions and performed vividly.

This excitement was close to clubs and live houses.

People present wouldn’t be able to stay uninvolved. It was the ultimate in-house excitement. The audience midway were obligated to pull in their friends. And the one allowing for that to happen, commanding the orchestra with a definite competence was Yukinoshita Haruno.

It’s because I was standing at the very end of the line that I could watch in composure. But if I were mixed in there, it would’ve turned into something frightening. Most likely, I would just keep sitting not sensing the mood and get frowned at afterwards.

The music from the orchestra continued, rushing towards the last segment.

“...usual.”

I could hear a voice next to me, so small that it could have been drowned out by the incredible intensity of the performance.

“Huh?” I couldn’t hear the entirety of what she had said, and I tilted my head with my ears raised.

Yukinoshita then moved her body slightly closer along with her mouth, “I said amazing as usual.”

The whispering voice in the waves of noise told me just how close we were even in this darkness. The soft drifting smell of freshness caused me to lean away in reflex.

I changed my mind and closed the distance by half a step. No problem, as long as our faces weren’t close, I shouldn’t be nervous.

“That’s a surprise. Hearing you compliment someone and all.”

“...Really? It may not look like it, but I do hold my nee-san in high regard, you know.” The closer we were, the clearer our voices were. But for the words Yukinoshita added afterwards, they were quiet enough that you could miss hearing them entirely. “I thought I wanted to be like that too.”

Her gaze was directed at the stage. And on there, swinging the baton, freely, like that of a sword dance and with a splendor, was Haruno-san.

On the ascended stage, rising even higher was the rostrum. Bathing herself in the spotlight on that stage was truly something befitting of her.

“...You don’t have to be like that. Just stay as you are.”

As if my expressive whisper had been smothered by the claps and cheers of the audience, I didn’t get a reply from Yukinoshita.

Chapter 9

And then, the curtains are drawn on **every stage**.

I replaced the battery of the camera that was set on the catwalk of the gymnasium and checked the remaining memory of the memory stick. Documenting the activities of the volunteer organizations was another one of our jobs as assistant historians. In addition to that, we had to do some editing work on the video data afterwards using the Final Cut Pro or whatever program that was installed on the Student Council's Macbook. I was taught a little bit about how to use the program, but it stayed bothersome indefinitely, and I stayed inept at even operating the Macbook due to being a Windows user. The most I could do was edit in subtitles.

Whether it was the Mac or the Final Pro Cut program, we had a good assortment of equipment. The camera was considerably first-rate as well thanks to the school's money and the sensitivity of the microphone was fair. I touched the screen and confirmed that the camera was in perfect shape for filming.

Once this was finished, the preparations for the ending ceremony were next. Compared to yesterday, I had it easy since my shift today was done as soon as I finished some miscellaneous tasks.

I went down the catwalk directly to the wing of the stage.

Hayama and his group's band were left in charge of the festival wrap-up, the volunteer performance just before the ending ceremony. In the backstage, we would begin preparations for the ceremony.

Because of that, the wing was hectic.

"Urrrrgh... ahh, crap, I'm totally nervous now," said Miura, hanging her head with a dampened expression. It looked like she was partaking in the volunteer band too.

When I examined the others, Hayama was strumming his unplugged guitar. Tobe was air drumming on invisible drums with his sticks. Another guy, Yamato, was holding his bass, standing rock still. Lastly, Oooka was gazing at the keyboard on the stage with intense concentration.

The only one in the group looking level-headed was Hayama while everyone else had their plates considerably full. Tobe was waving his head around much more than he was with his drumsticks.

Erratically walking around those band members was a person.

"Ummm, for the stage drinks... Ah, maybe it'll be easier to drink with straws."

“Yui, this is where you stab the scissors into the cap. You then spin the scissors to make a nice hole. That way you can put the straw through it.”

“Wow, Hina, you’re amazing.”

Are you guys their managers or something?

After preparing several headsets that were finished charging, Yukinoshita paced back and forth and it was extremely bothersome.

“What, do you need something?” I asked.

Yukinoshita looked taken aback and asked back, “Hey... Where’s Sagami-san?” I looked around after she asked. True, I didn’t recall having ever seen her once. “I wanted to meet with her one last time before the ending ceremony...”

“I’ll try giving her a call.” Meguri made the call and frowned. “...It looks like she’s either out of range or her battery is dead.”

This person just went and announced it.

“I’ll try asking other people.”

She made consecutive calls, but wasn’t finding much luck.

“Is everyone here?”

“We are.”

Sneakily appearing from behind the thick curtains were the student council members.

What the, are you guys ninjas? Or maybe assassins?

“Can you guys go look for Sagami-san? Can you keep me updated regularly too?”

“As you command.”

Like I said, are you guys ninjas or something?

The executive members of the student council mustered all their efforts and ran out to search.

Every ninja master was able to track Sagami’s movements up until the afternoon, but was unable to pursue her any farther past that time. Their efforts all came to a halt.

Once Hayama and his group finished their upcoming performance, the ending ceremony would be immediately held after. If we consider checks right before the ceremony and its preparations, there wasn’t very much time left.

Yukinoshita crossed her arms and gravely closed her eyes. When Yuigahama saw that, she jogged over to her.

“What’s up, Yukinon?”

“Do you know where Sagami-san is?” asked Yukinoshita.

Yuigahama shook her head. “I wonder? I haven’t seen her... Are you in trouble if she isn’t here?” Yukinoshita nodded and Yuigahama took out her cellphone. “Hmm. I’ll try giving her a call.”

As Yuigahama moved away from Yukinoshita to make the call came into view, I made another suggestion.

“How about making an announcement for her?”

“I suppose so.”

We made arrangements with the broadcast room and made a campus announcement, but there was no response.

“Yukinoshita.”

Hiratsuka-sensei quietly came in from the back entrance, likely having heard that broadcast.

She asked, “Did Sagami show?”

Yukinoshita shook her head.

“...I see. The faculty are more or less aware of the situation after hearing the announcement. If they find her, they’ll contact me, but...” said Hiratsuka-sensei, but her expression was bleak. It looked like she was indicating to us that we shouldn’t expect too much.

In contrast to the audience that burned with fervor, the backstage dipped to colder levels. As time passed, the absence of the Planning Committee Chairwoman grew graver

“This is a problem... At this rate, we won’t be able to hold the ending ceremony.”

“Right...” Meguri-senpai nodded with a slightly worried look.

Concerned about their two gloomy expressions, Yuigahama asked, “Is it bad if Sagami isn’t here?”

“Yes. It’s Sagami-san’s job to give a speech, express her thoughts on the festival, and present the awards.”

Those were jobs handled by the Planning Committee Chairman for every generation. It didn’t matter what condition Sagami was in, the job she was entrusted with wouldn’t change.

“...At worst, we’ll need a substitute.”

Meguri-senpai considered the next best option. In that case, the substitute would have to be either Meguri-senpai or Yukinoshita. Considering their roles and positions, even if one of them took up the torch, we could easily make up an excuse. But it wouldn’t change how unsightly the situation would look.

However, Yukinoshita shot down that suggestion.

“I think that will be difficult. Sagami-san’s the only one who knows the voting results for the excellence and community awards...”

The tally of the votes was all done by people at the conference room, taking turns as the situation called for it. As such, everyone only had a partial understanding of what the results were and only Sagami who had compiled it knew it all.

“How about moving the award announcements to another day?” I said.

Yukinoshita nodded. However, her expression was still rigid.

“We’ll have to in the worst case scenario. But there’s no point if we don’t announce the community award today.”

This Cultural Festival was for advocating connections with the community. Announcing the very first community award, a new award that was established with this festival, on another day wouldn’t make good publicity.

Either way, searching for Sagami was essential.

But we were stuck since we still hadn’t been able to get in touch with her.

Yukinoshita tensely bit her lips.

“Is something wrong?”

Even though his performance was coming right up, Hayama came over and asked with a composed look. He must have sensed the severity of the atmosphere.

“Ah, actually, we can’t seem to get in touch with Sagami-san...” Meguri-senpai explained the situation to him.

Hayama then quickly moved into action.

“Vice Chair, I want to request a change to the program. Could we add one more song to it...? We don’t have the time, so a verbal agreement should be good enough, right?”

“Can you do that?”

“Yeah... Yumiko. Can you play the guitar and sing for one more song?”

“Eh, one more? Are you serious? No, no, no, no way. Really! I’m, like, gonna explode as it is right now!”

When Miura was thrown into the conversation while she was already tensing up, she showed genuine surprise.

“Please?”

But with Hayama smiling at her, Miura was stumped and groaned. Then, she went “uuuuuuuuuuuuuugh” and held her head. She looked just a little cute doing that.

Yukinoshita took a step forward in front of the worrying Miura.

“...If we can ask you to bear with it for us, that would be a big help to us.”

“...Ugh... You must be joking...” Miura sighed in resignation and shot up her face. She then glared at Yukinoshita. “I’m not doing this for you or anything, you got that?”

Instead of trying to hide her embarrassment, Miura glared at Yukinoshita with a considerable hostility and turned her heels.

“C’m on, Tobe, Oooka, Yamato. Standby, guys.” Miura bonked their heads as she gallantly headed for the stage.

The three followed after her obediently, “Seriously?”, “Crap, crap”, “You gotta be joking”.

The four of them went into standby and the volunteer management group moved in a frantic. They went over every time slot again and strenuously squeezed time for another song.

In that time, Hayama took out his cellphone and promptly operated it. Aside from simple text, he used a variety of other things: mailing lists, SNS, Facebook, LINE, and so forth. Once he was done with those, he made several phone calls as well.

After doing enough to warrant a break, Hayama breathed out.

“...You have my gratitude.”

“Don’t worry about it. I want to show off a bit today too. Anyways... we’re going to be on stage now, but at most, we can only get you ten minutes. You’ll need to find her by then.”

“Right.”

“.....”

Only ten minutes... Since she wasn’t picking up her phone and wasn’t responding to the announcement, she clearly just wanted to run away. Given this short amount of time, there was no way you could find someone who wanted to hide.

“I’ll try looking too,” said Yuigahama, and she tried to go out.

I stopped her. “Blindly looking isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

The student council members were already out there looking for her. We were utilizing a lot of resources. Yet, we still hadn’t found her. Even if Yuigahama went out to search for her, I could only see her coming back empty handed.

Instead, if we assume Sagami wasn’t coming back, then we should use the extra time productively and think of the next option.

“The quickest way is to have a substitute take her place and make up the results of the awards on the spot. It’s not like the results are public knowledge, anyway,” I said

Everyone then made a “ugh” expression.

“Hikigaya...”

“That might be overboard...”

“That’s just a little...”

“I think that might not be a good idea.”

Hiratsuka-sensei, Meguri-senpai, Yuigahama and Hayama expressed their good conscientious opinions... *No good, huh?* I thought it was a considerably realistic suggestion though.

Yukinoshita, who should have been the first one to reject my opinion at a time like this, was quiet. I looked at her out of curiosity and Yukinoshita placed her hand on her mouth, looking like she was thinking of something.

“...Hikigaya-kun.”

“What?”

I stood there in suspense, wondering what amazing things she would blurt out considering the time she took to think, but Yukinoshita directly gazed at me.

“If we can buy you ten more minutes, do you think you could find her?” asked Yukinoshita.

“Hard to say...”

I gave that possibility some thought.

It was just about time for Miura and the others to be on stage. Their repertoire included one extra song. If they do well, could they throw in some MC work too before and after the songs? There was also the time to go on and off the stage. Then there was the amount of time the visitors would be willing to wait quietly until the ending ceremony. But there’s also the chance that something unexpected could spring up and take up time.

With all of that in mind, the actual net time they could buy from this point on was about seven to eight minutes.

So adding another ten minutes here to that, I had effectively fifteen minutes to do something. In that case, my feet could only carry me to at most one place from the gymnasium. If Sagami was outside the premises, that was game. That’s why I could only guess and wager on that single chance.

“...I don’t know is all I can say.”

“I see, but you didn’t say it’s impossible. That’s more than enough.”

My vague answer was answered with a definite answer from Yukinoshita.

She then took out her cellphone. As she held it in her hand, she let out one, deep breath. As if she had made her resolution, she made a phone call.

Her eyes remaining closed as she waited for the other party to pick up. A few seconds later, Yukinoshita abruptly opened her eyes.

“Nee-san? Come to the wing of the stage right now.”

How was she going to get ten more minutes? Yukinoshita had found the answer to that question.

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After Yukinoshita called, the person on the other end immediately appeared.

“Helloooo, Yukino-chan. Did you need something? I want to watch the bands perform, you know. It’s almost Hayato’s turn too.”

Yukinoshita Haruno’s smile was frighteningly overflowing with composure. Apparently, she had been watching the volunteer bands the entire time. The phone call wasn’t actually necessary since she was surprisingly close by.

Yukinoshita went straight to business, not complaining about Haruno-san in response.

“Nee-san, help us.”

She was so frank with her declaration that the look in Haruno-san’s eyes changed. Keeping silent, she looked down on Yukinoshita with a frigid gaze.

Even so, Yukinoshita didn’t avert her eyes. If anything, her eyes contained a powerful conviction as she glared back.

The mingling of their gazes was quiet and incredibly intense. It was as if liquid nitrogen was dumped on the surrounding air, freezing it over.

A chuckle was accompanied by an icy, broad smile.

“Ohh... sure. This is actually the first time Yukino-chan has ever asked me for something. So I’ll listen to your request just this once.”

Those words that were spoken from high above sounded benevolent yet in them were no traces of sweetness. It was overly relentless, much more so than outright refusal.

But Yukinoshita tilted her head to those words. Abruptly, she smiled.

“...Request? I can’t have you misunderstanding me. This is an order for you as a Planning Committee member. Did you not look at the organogram? In a command hierarchy, you need to be aware that I am in a higher position than you are. Volunteer representatives have the obligation of cooperation even if they happen to be people unaffiliated with the school.”

Yukinoshita snapped back with absolute confidence. She insisted on keeping her arrogant attitude. She may have been the one who had asked for her help, but she wouldn’t back down from her absolute, superior position.

That appearance of hers caused me to recall her from half a year ago.

She wouldn't pamper the other party, she would wield overhead her own righteousness, and use that as a blade to cut down her enemies; that appearance itself was Yukinoshita Yukino.

The opposite, Yukinoshita Haruno, was giggling, laughing with actual enjoyment.

"So, is there some kind of penalty for going against that obligation? You don't have any legal means to make me comply, right? You can revoke my right to the stage, but that doesn't matter to me anymore. What are you going to do? Tattle to the teacher?"

All she did was chuckle, as if ridiculing that childish righteousness, as if laughing at that miniature garden of justice.

But Haruno-san's statement was so painfully realistic that it couldn't be refuted.

Yukinoshita's discourse was supposed to be ideally based on fundamental truths and rules, a position that demanded for them. In other words, you could call her idealistic.

Ultimately, Haruno-san's pragmatic attitude was incompatible with Yukinoshita.

Ah, this isn't good. Yukinoshita was at a slight disadvantage here. The one who should be opposing realists should be a nihilist like me.

Yukinoshita sensed that I was going to say something and she gently raised her hand to stop me. She turned her head ever so slightly and softly smiled.

"I'll be fine. I'll stay strong." Both were conveyed with just one smile.

She returned her gaze back to Haruno-san and strengthened the tone of her voice.

"There isn't a penalty... But there's a merit for you."

"Like?" Haruno-san laughed with interest.

Yukinoshita pushed aside the intensity that seeped from Haruno-san's beautifully distorted smile and placed her hand on her bosom.

"You can make me be in your debt. You can interpret that as you wish, nee-san." Yukinoshita stated boldly, and Haruno-san jerked to a stop.

"Uh huh..." Haruno-san was no longer laughing. Nevertheless, she continued to gaze at Yukinoshita with a cold expression. "...Yukino-chan, you sure have grown."

"No..." In contrast, Yukinoshita smiled. "I was always this kind of person. We've been together for seventeen years and you never noticed?"

"I see..." Haruno-san answered briefly, and then partially shut her eyes. Because of that, I couldn't easily read into what she was thinking.

“Heh...” I chuckled involuntarily.

“...Yes?”

“No, it’s nothing...”

Yukinoshita gave me a glancing glare, and I laughed again.

—*Yeah, she’s absolutely right. Yukinoshita Yukino is this kind of person.*

Haruno-san folded her arms to lighten up. Her gesture looked very similar to Yukinoshita.

“So, what are you planning to do?”

“Add fillers to the stage,” said Yukinoshita, frankly. It wasn’t an answer, however.

Looking slightly indignant, Haruno-san asked again, “And just how are you going to do that?”

“With me, nee-san... and two other people, we should be able to manage something. If possible, with one more person.” Yukinoshita looked at the instruments in the wing. I had a rough idea of what she was going to do from just that.

“Hey, Yukinoshita, you can’t be serious.” I asked in surprise.

Haruno-san who interpreted it similarly with the same view as me broadly grinned. “Oh ho, you think of some fun stuff. So, what song?”

“Since we’re going to perform without rehearsal, then we can only go with what we can do. Nee-san, can you still play the song you performed a long time ago during the Cultural Festival?” asked Yukinoshita.

Haruno-san tried singing the song, the one she had likely played long ago during the Cultural Festival. I should have known since it was Yukinoshita Haruno, but I found myself listening in to her humming. Yuigahama went “ohh, that song, huh?” looked impressed, and enjoyed listening. It was a song that even I knew. Of course, Yuigahama should know it as well.

After Haruno-san finished her brief singing, she made an unyielding smirk. “Now just who are you saying that to? The question is, can you, Yukino-chan?”

“If it’s something nee-san has done before, then for the most part, I can do it too.”

...*She definitely practiced behind her back, no doubt about it.*

Hearing that, Haruno-san nodded. “Really. Okay, just one more person and we’re good to go.”

We all looked at each other after hearing Haruno-san’s words. *No, no, no, Yukinoshita just said earlier that you needed two more people, you know? Your arithmetic level is one thing, but there was a problem before that...* I thought, but an audible deep and loud sigh came from nearby.

Haruno-san called the name of the person who made that sigh. “Shizuka-chan.”

“...I guess I’ll have to. I’ll handle the bass. If it’s the song Haruno performed before, then I should still be able to play it.”

Speaking of which, when we met during summer, she said Haruno-san had forced her into the band for the Cultural Festival or something to that effect...

And then, Haruno-san turned around on her feet and said, “Meguri, you can support with the keyboard, right?”

“Yes, leave it to me!” Meguri-senpai answered energetically, forming fists with both of her hands.

She was someone who had seen Haruno-san’s live performance before and was also used to standing in front of people. There was no indecision in her reply.

“Now we just need vocals?” asked Haruno-san.

With a contemplative expression, Yukinoshita said, “...Yuigahama-san.”

“Wuh!?”

She probably wasn’t expecting to be called on given the direction the situation was heading in. She responded with an earnestly surprised voice.

Yukinoshita took a step closer to Yuigahama.

“Is it okay, if I can rely on you for this?”

“Ah, umm... Well, I kind of don’t have confidence... I mean, I don’t think I’ll be able to do it very well, and I might just get in the way, so um...”

Yuigahama pressed her fingers together, averting her eyes while mumbling her words in embarrassment.

“But—” She cut her word short and gripped Yukinoshita’s hands. “...I’ve been waiting for you to say that.”

Yukinoshita delicately returned her squeeze. “...Thank you.”

“Uh huh... B-But I have a funny recollection of the lyrics in my head, okay!? You better not expect any more from me there, okay!?”

“The correct phrasing is ‘vague recollection’. Now I’m worried from your little mistake...”

“Yukinon, aren’t you being a little too mean!?” Yuigahama rocked their joined hands around in objection.

Yukinoshita smiled. “I’m just kidding. If you think you’ll run into problems, I can sing as well. That’s why, um, I don’t mind, if you rely on me, so...”

“...Okay!” Yuigahama answered Yukinoshita whose cheeks were blushing so much that you could tell even in the dark wing.

After seeing those two with my own eyes, I quietly headed for the exit of the gymnasium at the back of the stage. Quietly and secretly, I commenced my operation.

“Hikigaya-kun.” A sudden voice reached my back. “We’re counting on you.”

“Hikki, do your best.”

I kept to myself in response to those voices.

Instead, I answered back by lifting my hand overhead and went straight out the door.

Now then, from here on, this is my time. These next ten minutes will be my ten minutes alone.

The stage under the spotlight isn’t the place I should be at.

The stage I should be standing on is the very path that is scarce of people, the path that continued from the dimly lit exit.

It’s the stage for Hikigaya Hachiman’s one-man act.

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The exit of the gym connected directly to the school building.

Every year, it was this school’s tradition to assign a volunteer band that could attract the most number of visitors to conclude the festival. Doing it this way made the movements of the students much more efficient, making the program somewhat irregular with the transition to the ending ceremony.



In other words, right now, this period of time was when the campus would be devoid of people.

Whatever the case, the ending ceremony was coming right up. So if the pervading thought was for everyone to gather to make some noise, then everyone would make their way towards the volunteer performances.

A campus desolate of people was convenient.

It was convenient enough that students would stick out like a sore thumb no matter how far away they were. It was essentially an ideal environment for digging out the enemy, Sagami.

But that didn't mean I had the luxury to visit every single place. Time was limited. Even checking the time was already a wasteful expenditure.

The clock couldn't tick any slower than it is now.

I couldn't move my body faster than it is able to.

The only thing I could do was accelerate my thought processes.

Think.

Loners have one thing to boast of; that's the intensity in their thinking. The resources that should have been meant for human relationships are directed only to themselves instead. Through repetitive personal reflection, introspection of their actions, regrets, delusions and, imagination, they develop the worthless ability to think, to the point it's become an ideology, a philosophy. By utilizing all of that, I'll explore every possibility, refute every conceivable conclusion, and reject them.

For the one possibility that remains, I will use every fiber of my being to substantiate it as if trying to protect myself.

Judgment on others and self-defense are the true worth of Hikigaya Hachiman.

As long I continue to go through the repetitions, I will naturally come across an answer.

It's a simple problem.

Right now, Sagami was by herself, most likely.

In that case, all I needed to do was follow her train of thought.

After all, when it comes to being a loner, I am one step, no, thousand steps higher. It isn't a yesterday and today career for me, for I am a veteran.

Don't sell me short.

Sagami was incredibly self-conscious. She should have been. In our first year, she was in a conspicuous group and she became accustomed to that environment and that hierarchy. But upon advancing to the second year, Miura's existence led to her decline in that social ladder. Surely enough, Sagami wasn't the least amused by that fact. But for someone so infatuated with ranks, Sagami couldn't lift a finger.

The result, she sought out others who were lower than her. At the very least, she wanted to aim for the second best group. She should have succeeded on that front. But having already had her quality of life improved once, it wasn't so easy to settle for worse.

And there, to satisfy herself, she had to look at alternatives.

And that was where the Cultural Festival came in.

Was the position of the Cultural Festival Planning Committee Chairwoman sufficient for that? It should have been. Even more so when she had become a Planning Committee member on Hayama's recommendation, and as soon as she became the Chairwoman, she was commended by the so-called legendary Yukinoshita Haruno. Lastly, she was able to gain Yukinoshita Yukino's excellent with her actual duties.

But suppose that all of that didn't go as planned.

Suppose that she wasn't able to obtain the things she wanted and suppose that she was outshined by even a substitute.

Sagami wasn't able to participate in her class as much as she would have liked to because of the Planning Committee. Even if she found that unsatisfactory and participated in her class preparations, there was someone who could fill in, no, exceed what she could ever do in the committee. As a matter of fact, even Haruno-san and Hayama who were the foundations of her confidence had acknowledged that substitute.

In that case, consider Sagami's pride, Sagami's self-esteem, and Sagami's self-consciousness.

It was a bitterness I understood as if I had picked it up with my hand.

It was a path that everyone had treaded through.

You're naïve, Sagami. That was a path that I had already gone through.

Getting caught skipping school and reported to the school was one of my memories.

Back then, I was so hopelessly and uncontrollably concerned with myself that I exploded, wanting someone to look at me.

That's why I can understand.

What it was that you wanted to do. Why you were doing it.

And possibly, why you didn't want to do it.

You're five years too slow.

That was something I had already gone through in elementary school.

I could narrow out the places she would go to.

When people lost their place to belong, what is it that they wished for? That is, to have someone find a place for them. If they can't find a place with their own eyes, then the only thing they can do is have someone else do it for them.

Now, all I needed to do was map out the locations in my head.

Because she wanted someone to search for her and find her that she was still on campus. It was also a place that was easily noticeable. Thus, she shouldn't be occupying a vacant classroom, let alone have it locked and closed off.

There was one more point.

It should be a place that she could be by herself. Hiding away in a congested area would mean she really would never be found. If she was aware of her own worthlessness, then she should have factored in that being in a group would mean she would disappear.

She couldn't go to a place that wasn't physically reachable. Mentally, she shouldn't be at a place that was too far off.

Then where else was left?

There were still too many options.

I needed a little more material, material that could be proof, or even counterproof.

If it's an explosion of excessive self-concern, then there was one other person besides me from the past.

To whittle down my ideas, I took out my cellphone.

I called the most recent phone call in my sad history of received calls.

[It is I.]

He instantly picked up. That's Zaimokuza for you. He wasn't fiddling with his cellphone because he had little to do for nothing. While I wanted to commend him, unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury. I quickly shot him a question.

"Zaimokuza, where are you at on campus by yourself normally?"

[Hoh, what is this all of a sudden? Bahon, I am always in suspended mode.]

"Just answer, I'm in a hurry."

[...Surely, you are serious?]

"Tch. I'm hanging up."

[Wait, wait, wait, please! The nurse's office or the veranda! Sometimes, I go to the library a lot! There's also the top of the special building.]

There were people in the nurse's office, and the veranda was being used by all the classes. The library was locked, so no one had access.

The top of the special building... The roof, huh?

[As for other where no one is usually present, there is also the space between the school annex and the club building. It is refreshing and quiet, for the sun does not reach there. It brings stability to your mind... Are you searching for someone?]

“Yeah, the Planning Committee Chairwoman.”

[Hoh, the woman who addressed us, eh? It seems you will require my powers...”

“You’re going to help out?”

[Inevitably. Where shall I search?]

“Can you look near the annex? Thanks, man! Love ya, Zaimokuza!”

[Indeed, as do I!]

“Shaddup, that’s gross!”

I cut off the call vigorously.

I had a feeling if it was the roof.

I ran as hard as I could to my class. The empty hallway was no different from a comfortable track.

But the less people there were, the higher the probability the person I was searching for would be there.

C’mon, please be there...

I dashed up the stairs with the feeling of toppling over. Luckily for me, there was someone sitting on a pipe chair at the front of my class.

The dark blue ponytail was crossing her legs in displeasure, absentmindedly gazing out of the window of the hallway.

I called out to her as I desperately tried to catch my breath. “Kawasaki...”

“What’s with the hard breathing...? Don’t you have Planning Committee work to do?”

I didn’t pay any attention to her question.

“A while back, you were on the roof, right?”

“Huh? What are you blabbering about?”

“Answer my question.”

I was limited on time, so my voice came out rough. I ended up speaking to her with a blunt tone.

“Y-You don’t n-need to get so angry...” Kawasaki started trembling with teary eyes.

After calming down, I slowly breathed out.

“I’m not angry. I’m just in a rush for the committee.”

“O-Okay, good...” Kawasaki breathed out and pressed her hand against her chest. Surprisingly, she was weak to pressure. Agh, not good, right now, the roof came first.

“So, before, you were on the rooftop, right? How did you get up there?”

“You have a really good memory...” Kawasaki whispered with a soft voice in nostalgia. Her gaze looked at me in embarrassment.

...I said I was in a hurry, didn't I? When that showed on my face, Kawasaki got flustered and tried to go back to what she was saying.

“U-Um, the roof door from the middle stairs has a broken lock. It's famous amongst the girls.”

...Really? In that case, it wouldn't be odd for Sagami to know about it. The condition that it was a place that other people would be aware of was also satisfied.

“What about it?”

Kawasaki asked me again, finding it strange why I went quiet after listening to her. My feet, however, were already on the move before I could even answer.

While I may have been in a hurry, I wanted to at least properly give her my thanks.

“Thanks! Love ya, Kawasaki!” I yelled out and sprinted off.

The moment I turned the hallway, an extremely loud shriek could be heard from behind me.

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Running up the stairs that continued to the roof was no easy feat because they were turned into a storage place for the Cultural Festival.

But there were small openings that allowed for people to pass through.

And most likely, Sagami had left a trail in these openings. For every step I pursued, the feeling I was getting closer grew stronger.

Sagami probably wanted to be like Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. To become a person that people would look up to, seek out, and rely on.

That's why she would instantly give out titles.

She wanted to increase her own worth by giving herself the label of Chairwoman and she wanted to make sure of her superiority by labeling others and looking down on them.

That was the true form of the “growth” that Sagami spoke of.

But growth isn't something like that.

Don't go mixing up simple change with growth.

I don't want to call simple change and the end solution of compromise, "growth". I don't want to pretend that "to become an adult" is to resign to your fate.

As if people can dramatically change so quickly within the span of a several months. Humans aren't transformers.

If I could become something I wanted to become, then I wouldn't have become like this in the first place.

You should change, I'll change, I have to change, I changed.

Lies and more lies.

Why can you accept so easily that your current self is wrong? Why do you deny your past self? Why can't you acknowledge your current self now? Why is it that you believe in your future self instead?

If you can't acknowledge yourself when you were the worst from long ago and yourself when you're at the very bottom right now, exactly when can you acknowledge someone? If you're going to reject yourself now and yourself up to this point now, can you really approve yourself from this point onwards?

Don't go thinking you can change by rejecting and overwriting yourself.

Holding onto a title from start to end, getting arrogant from acknowledgement, getting drunk on your own circumstances, screaming out how important you are, abiding by your own created rules, and being blind to your own world unless you are told outright; don't you dare call that growth.

Why can't you just say that you don't have to change, that it's fine to stay as you are?

As I continued to climb up the stairs that continued to the roof, boxes and material decreased and decreased.

Eventually, at the end, an opened platform of the stairs appeared.

Beyond the door is a dead end, the end of the line.

This game of hide-and-seek is over.

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The padlock of the door was broken like Kawasaki had said. I grabbed the padlock attached to the door and fiddled with it. I locked it and though it looked locked, pulling at it with a little strength caused it to come apart. With this, it was pretty easy to trespass on the roof...

I opened the flimsy door that was slightly rusted over. The door made *screeeeek* noises as it pushed out.

The wind blew past me and at the same time, the blue sky expanded before me.

The sky was supposed to feel closer for how high up I was, but with nothing to compare, it felt much farther than usual.

Sagami was leaning on the fence as she was looking my way.

Her expression was surprised which transitioned to disappointment.

Well, what did you expect? The one who Sagami wanted to come searching for her wasn't me. As a matter of fact, she didn't even want someone like me here.

I felt apologetic for not meeting her expectations, but I didn't even want to look for her either. So give me a break and let's call it even.

In any case, our conditions were the same.

That meant we should be able to start a conversation on equal grounds.

"The ending ceremony's about to start so go back." I curtly conveyed to her my business.

Sagami frowned with an unpleasant look.

"It's not like I'm the one that needs to do it," said Sagami, and she turned away from me. She clearly wasn't planning on listening to me any further.

"Sorry but issues came up, so we can't have that. There really isn't much time left. You'll save us some trouble if you hurry up and go back."

Even I thought my words weren't very convincing.

But even so, I carefully chose my words, making sure not to give Sagami the words she wanted to hear.

"Time... Huh? Hasn't the ending ceremony, like, already started?"

So the person in question was fully aware of that. That fact slightly rubbed me the wrong way.

"Yeah, normally, it would have. But somehow, we're managing to push it back. So—"

"Uh huh, and who's doing that?"

"Ahh, right. Miura, Yukinoshita, and the others, pretty much," I answered.

That being said, it's likely that Miura's group's turn was long over. It was just about the time for Yukinoshita and the others to be on standby.

Sagami strongly gripped the fence. "Oh I see..."

"If you get it, then go back."

"Then just have Yukinoshita-san do it. I mean, she can do everything."

"Huh? That's not the problem. We have other things like presenting the voting results that you're holding onto."

As I expected, Sagami blurted out incredibly aggravating things that my irritation with her intensified. This wasn't even the time to be taking it easy and have this exchange too...

"Well, you guys could have just, like, recalculated the total results again. If everyone helped out, then it'd be done in no time..."

"No, that's not possible. There's no one free enough to do that right now."

"Then just take the voting results with you!"

The wires of the fence shook as Sagami slapped the sheet of paper recorded with the aggregated results.

For an instant, I seriously considered taking just the paper and going back.

But I couldn't do that.

The request that Yukinoshita—the Service Club—had accepted was to assist Sagami with her work as the Cultural Festival Planning Committee Chairwoman. That's to say, we were to make Sagami Minami properly fulfill her duty as the Cultural Festival Planning Committee Chairwoman.

If it wasn't for that request, I wouldn't be here, nor would Yukinoshita have had to be the Vice Chair. Abandoning the request now would equate to denying everything Yukinoshita had done thus far.

That's why what I needed to do right now was to get Sagami Minami to attend the ending ceremony; to have her stand on the stage as the Chairwoman, to have her be bestowed the glory of the Chairwoman, and without fail, to bestow her the regrets and frustrations as the Chairwoman.

What should I do to make that happen?

Truthfully, if we just had the person Sagami had wished for to tell her the words she wanted to hear, then the case was closed.

Unfortunately, that wasn't something I could do.

I could try talking her out of it, but Sagami would stubbornly stay put.

Should I get in touch with someone and have him come here? But who? The only contacts I had in hand were Yuigahama and Hiratsuka-sensei and they were likely already onstage. I had the feeling there wouldn't be much of a difference with Totsuka and Zaimokuza here.

To think of all times my isolation would backfire on me at a place like this.

I came this far and I'm stuck, huh...?

I unconsciously and strongly gripped my fists in aggravation.

It was that moment.

The sounds of *screeeeek* could be heard.

I and likely Sagami as well, turned around.

“So this was where you were... We’ve been looking for you.”

Appearing from the door was Hayama Hayato. Following behind him were Sagami’s two friends she associated with in the Planning Committee. It looked like they were brought along by Hayama.

“Hayama-kun... You guys, too...” Sagami called his name and looked away. The development that Sagami was expecting for was likely this.

As if living up to her expectations, Hayama approached her step by step. “We were really worried since we couldn’t get in touch with you. We went around asking and some first years saw you go up the stairs.”

Utilizing his inherent personal connections, it looked like Hayama traversed on thin threads to make his way here. I couldn’t expect any less from him.

But in contrast to Hayama who had finally found his way here, Sagami’s attitude remained obstinate.

“Sorry, but...”

“Why don’t we hurry and go back? Everyone’s waiting. Okay?”

“Yeah!”

“We were really worried!”

Hayama was well aware that we had no time. He gave Sagami the words she had been hoping for with sincerity, trying to convince her.

With those three calling for her, Sagami’s attitude began to weaken. She grasped the hands of her friends and shared their warmth together.

But that still wasn’t enough.

“But even if I go back now...”

“That’s not true, everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Let’s go back together, okay?”

Hayama watched over their exchange, but for an instant, his eyes were directed towards his wristwatch. He, too, was in a hurry.

“That’s right. Everyone’s trying their best for you too, Sagami-san.”

The last push, or probably not, but Hayama used whatever words he could to persuade her.

“But, like, I’ve been a huge bother to everyone, so I just can’t look them all in the eye...”

Sagami’s eyes watered and she sobbed with her friends surrounding her. Everyone tried to give her sooth her with words, but Sagami’s feet refused to move.

The only things in motion were the hands of the clock.

So Hayama's presence had no effect either, huh...?

The time continued to pass, moment by moment.

There was no more time until we hit the time limit.

What was the fastest and shortest way to force Sagami to leave from here?

By force?

NO.

Had it been just Hayama and me, it may have been possible. But with her two friends present, they would definitely get in the way. We would lose time.

Also.

Doing it that way wouldn't have been what Yukinoshita would have wanted. Ultimately, we had to get Sagami to move from here with her own legs, with her own conviction.

Yukinoshita would attack things head-on and stake her pride by doing things her way all within the scope of her full capacity; this way of doing things was what she abided by.

In that case, I had no choice.

I had no choice but to stick with my way of doing things.

That is, fair and square, straight on, despicably, maliciously, and underhandedly.

Just how could I communicate properly with Sagami?

There are two ways of communication between two people of the lowest stratum.

One is to lick each other's wounds and the other is to kick each other down.

Thus, there is only one method.

I looked at Sagami, and then at Hayama.

Hayama was still trying to encourage Sagami, offering her kind words while taking one step closer and closer.

"It's fine, so let's go back."

"Like, I'm just the worst..." Sagami uttered those self-inflicting words and his legs stopped again.

That's why, this was the exact moment. Good grief, I really was disgusted; disgusted that I could only come up with things like these and that I surprisingly didn't hate it.

I forced out a deep and long sigh, "Haaa", mixed with irritation.

"You really are the worst."

Those words caused everyone to lose their words and go stiff.

Their four gazes focused on me.

My audience was four people.

For someone like me, it was a turnout that I couldn't ask for more.

"Sagami. In the end, the only thing you really want is to be pampered. You're acting like that because you want people to care about you, right? Like now, you just want them to say 'that's not true at all' to you. It's obvious a person like that won't be treated as the Chairperson. You really are the worst."

"What, are you saying...?"

I interrupted Sagami's trembling voice.

"I'm pretty sure everyone's already realized. Even someone like me who doesn't know a single thing about you can understand."

"Don't, put me together with the likes of you..."

"We're the same. We're both living at the bottom of the world."

Sagami's eyes were no longer moist. They were dry, seething with hatred.

I meticulously chose my words, all the while not giving her a chance to argue back. What I blurted out earlier was the subjective reality that I saw. The only thing I could do with that was anger Sagami.

"Think about it. I don't give a damn about you, yet I was the first one to find you."

It's when the objective truth is stated that the situation starts to move.

"So, doesn't that mean... no one was actually seriously looking for you at all?"

Sagami turned pale. The anger and hatred she had kept buried the entire time was replaced with shock and despair that distorted her expression. Unable to repress her jumbled emotions, coming to surface was only the act of biting her lips in agony.

"Don't you realize it yourself? That you're just—"

Before my words could leave my mouth, I was stopped. Instead, my neck had sounded out.

"Hikigaya, shut up for a bit." Hayama gripped my collar with his right hand and forced me against the wall.

My breath left my mouth the moment I had received the impact from slamming in the wall.

"...Gh."

To disguise that voice, I sneered in desperation. Hayama's fist that strongly gripped onto my collar trembled. He took a shallow breath in and then deeply breathed out as if trying to pacify his feelings.

Our glares lasted a few seconds.

The three girls who had gone stiff from the frozen mood exploding came over frantically to stop him.

"Hayama-kun, don't, you don't need to do anymore! Let's just leave somebody like him and get out of here, okay? Okay?" said Sagami, placing her palm on Hayama's back.

With that acting as a trigger, Hayama strongly breathed out and released my collar as if to shove me away. He turned his back without so much a look at me and urged the other three in composure. "...Let's hurry back."

Sagami left the roof enclosed by her two friends as if she was being escorted out. As they were leaving, they deliberately had an insulting conversation.

"Sagami, are you okay?"

"Anyway, let's go, okay?"

"Like, who the heck is he? Isn't he terrible?"

"I don't know. The heck is up with him?"

After those three disappeared, Hayama closed the door last.

"...Why is that the only way you know how to do things?"

Those whispered words that sounded like a mutter stung my ears.

Left alone on the rooftop, I rested my back against the wall. I slid down the wall and dropped my waist to the floor.

The sky was far up.

Hayama, I'm glad that you're a really upstanding and good guy.

You aren't Hayama if you didn't get angry there.

Hayama, I'm glad that you're a guy who can't stand seeing people be hurt right in front of you. I'm glad that you're a guy who can't forgive someone who hurt others.

See, it's simple. —A world where no one was hurt is now complete.

I'm sure it's exactly as Hayama said, that this way of doing things is wrong.

But even so, as I am now, this is the only way I knew.

However, I think that even someone like me will change eventually.

One day, without a doubt, I will change. I *will* be changed.

It didn't matter what my heart was like, how I am seen, how I am perceived and how I am judged will undoubtedly change.

If a world that is in a constant state of flux continues to change, then my surroundings, my environments, and the axis around which I evaluate will distort and change, and my essential nature will change.

That's why.

—I won't change.

“Jeez...” I let out a deep, deep sigh.

...It should be about time for the ending ceremony.

I sent a text to Zaimokuza written with “Solved” and forcibly lifted my heavy body from the floor and left the rooftop.

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I naturally picked up my pace towards the gym.

It's not like I wanted to know what the situation was like. Quite frankly, I didn't really care at all about what happened to Sagami.

It's just that the gazes and interests of people in the hallway were all directed towards the gymnasium.

Low bass sounds that reached the hallway caused the students and visitors to pursue the origin of those sounds. And from there, their legs would carry them to the gymnasium as if they were being pulled in.

This low, creeping sound that could be felt circulating throughout the entire school building was likely coming from a bass and a bass drum.

But the shaking vibrations weren't the only things that reverberated at the bottom of my stomach.

They were the cheering voices.

The clapping of hands with the simultaneous interjection of stamping feet was a living rhythm.

Those vibrations and the rhythmic palpitations of every person gave birth to a beat within the school.

In the school building, there were very little people.

The students and the teachers were all gathered here for the sake of the ending ceremony.

I placed my hands on the door of the gymnasium.

The moment I opened the door, spilling out was a surge of light and sound.

The searchlights danced and hopped, the mirror ball hanging from the ceiling dispersed irregular reflections of light throughout.

Standing within that vortex of light were the girls.

The bassist that engraved her sounds with a starving greed.

The drummer that pranced in whimsical fashion to emphasize her existence.

The sincere guitarist that regulated the entire song through her unparalleled and accurate picking as if she was restraining the crowd of rhythm that did whatever they wanted.

And then, a carefree voice. The vocalist that occasionally rebounded, but sang the straightforward, note by note, musical rhythm and line by line of the lyrics, with care.

The guitarist took a step to the center as if to get close to that vocalist. The both of them had changed at some point to matching T-shirts, and weaved the song together as if they were supporting each other.

Those who waved their arms at the front, those who rocked their heads, those who shook their dimly glowing phones like sea lilies, and those who got carried away and dived from the seats of the audience into the audience and then lifted high up.

It's because of the professional... No, it's because of the amateurish nature that there was this fervent enthusiasm.

If the drummer accelerated with provocation, the guitarist would lash back, challenging her through the picking of her guitar strings. When it looked like things were going to collapse, the slapping of the bass would scold them back into shape.

Then, as if holding everything tightly together at her chest, the vocalist stretched out her arms and sang out her voice with all her might.

Mid-song, the calls of the vocalist would be returned with responses from the audience. Raging waves would travel from right to left. The glow sticks that emitted a brilliant were as though they were scattered stars.

It was this moment alone, in this darkness, that everyone had become one.

Not a single individual had noticed my entry.

Of course, there was no way those on stage had either.

I leaned against the wall within that irritating, fervent enthusiasm.

Because everyone was trying to get closer to the stage, the space in the back was vacant. The surroundings, too, were devoid of people.

It was the final stage of the long, long Cultural Festival. With this, everything would end.

Ahh, speaking of which, I was an assistant historian, wasn't I?

So, at the very least, I will remember this.

I likely won't forget this view. I *can't* forget it.

I may not be on that dazzling stage.

I may not be a part of that leaping arena.

I may be just watching furthest at the back by myself.

But I will definitely not forget this view.

Chapter 10

At last, **he and she** find the correct answer.

The ending ceremony was performed without issue.

Sagami's address, however, ended on an unsightly note.

Naturally stammering her speech, the content jumping all over the place, and failing to announce the excellence award.

Yukinoshita calmly held up the cue cards all the way through.

In the end, tears began streaming from Sagami's eyes.

Students who saw her as being moved to tears shouted to her, "Do your best!", "It was an awesome festival!", "Thank you!"

Before that, I didn't think for a second that those were the tears they had thought they were. Vexed at how pathetic she was, vexed at having to be subjected to this experience; they were those kinds of tears.

However, the tears that flowed after her greeting and tribute speeches were, I'm sure, honestly from being deeply moved.

It was only after going through the worst feeling that words of kindness would really settle in. Of course, the one who was responsible for making her feel that way was me, so I felt extremely guilty for that.

Sagami exited to the wing of the state, her makeup in a complete mess, and looked considerably exhausted. Her friends promptly came to support her up as if she had just reached the goal of a marathon.

"You okay?"

"You would've been completely fine if that guy didn't say anything."

"That would totally screw you up."

It looked like my actions were being talked about and the gazes I had been getting from the Planning Committee members for a while now hurt.

Moreover, the news seemed to have propagated to my class as well. Everyone in 2-F would look at me and then whisper amongst each other.

It was a fairly painful place to be in.

Mixed in that repressed commotion were familiar voices.

"Ah, ya see? Hikitani-kun's seriously terrible, man! Somethin' happened like that durin' summer too!"

Curse you, Tobe...

“... Well, he’s just got a bad mouth. If you actually talk to him, he isn’t really like that.”

“Hayato’s so nice...”

“Hayato-kun is covering for Hikitani-kun... Yesterday’s enemy is today’s homo, buha—“

“C’mon, Ebina, you seriously just need to stay quiet... Look, now your nose is bleeding. Here, blow your nose.”

Yuigahama had a wry smile the entire time while Totsuka looked at me out of concern.

I returned a smile, telling him that this was nothing at all, and watched my classmates make their way to the exit.

There was still Planning Committee work even after all the classes had left the area.

We got to work with cleaning up the stage, the wing, and the sound and video equipment. Every member of the Planning Committee was involved. As I watched from the side, I thought that the committee had, when all was said and done, grown unified. Though, that was a strange thought since I was a member as well.

“Alright, gather round, Planning Committee!”

With most of our work completed, the gym teacher Atsugi, who held an administrative position for the Cultural Festival, yelled out. The Planning Committee slowly assembled together in front of him.

“Alright, you guys still got plenty of work left, but first off, good job. The Cultural Festival ain’t too shabby from what I could see. As for the celebration party afterwards, don’t screw around too much that you’ll cause trouble, you hear? Stay safe.”

While his call was overbearing, his words were gentle.

What followed were claps and cheers of “woo”. It was the final storm of emotions where everyone had become one, praising each other for their hard efforts and mutual struggles. Sagami who was standing to the side was given a little push from Meguri-senpai.

“It’s your chance, Chairwoman Sagami.”

“Eh? But...”

She was telling her to address everyone with a word or two. Realizing that, Sagami hesitated. After carrying out the opening ceremony poorly, causing chaos in the middle, abandoning her responsibility during the ending ceremony, and concluding the festival on a sloppy note, hesitating was the natural reaction.

“You’re the Chairwoman, aren’t you?” said Yukinoshita, stating an established truth with a severe tone.

If the regrets and failures of the Chairwoman belonged to Sagami, so did the glory and commendation that accompanied it.

“...Right,” said Sagami, making a slight, bitter nod. “Um, I apologize for all the trouble I’ve caused. But I’m very glad that everything ended safely... Thank you very much and thank you for your hard work.”

“Thanks to you too!”

Everyone bowed their heads lastly and dispersed. The girls hugged each other while the guys did high fives. Sagami turned to Yukinoshita and slightly bowed her head.

It’s finally over...

I left the circle of Planning Committee members and let out a long sigh.

Everyone proceeded to return to their classes while chatting with each other. They were discussing the celebration party tonight. It’s likely they wouldn’t invite me to it. If they did, it wouldn’t be out of kindness, but as a formality because they disliked leaving someone out. Although even if I went, the only thing I could really do was stuff my face anyway...

The sudden onset of exhaustion caused me to drag my legs.

Everyone else proceeded to go past me.

The moment Sagami and her friends walked past me on the side, their conversation ceased for an instant. Making sure not to even give me so much of a look, their gazes were slightly fixated straight ahead.

You really are naïve, Sagami. If you seriously wanted to ignore someone, you’re supposed to do it without actually being aware of it.

In that traffic of people, I spotted Meguri-senpai.

When she noticed me, she walked over. “...Thank you for your work.”

“You as well.”

Her expression was gloomy when she came to talk to me.

“Your insincerity really is just the worst, huh?”

Did she hear about the circumstances from Sagami, or maybe even her two friends? Then again, she didn’t have a very position impression of me anyway so that didn’t matter. Being told that and unable to voice an objection, I could only apologize.

“I’m sorry...”

“...But, I had a lot of fun. I’m really happy this great Cultural Festival was my last. Thank you,” said Meguri-senpai, showing a comfortable smile. She waved her hands and left with “I’ll see you later then.”

For Meguri-senpai, it was her very last Cultural Festival. As the Student Council President, I think that was something she didn't want to yield. On the surface, at the least, she was probably glad that there weren't any huge problems.

It was a feeling that saved me ever so slightly.

"Are you okay with this?"

My answer to the question presented to me from behind was already set in stone.

"Yeah, this is fine."

"I see..."

You can't clear misunderstandings. But what you can do is ask something new. The question she posed me and the answer I gave may not have been the correct one, but it was an answer I was fond of. That's why this is fine.

I slowed my walking feet.

The gymnasium that was mostly devoid of people made the unchanging gait from behind me distinct.

Coming up to my side and walking with me was Yukinoshita Yukino.

"... You really do try to save everyone, don't you?"

"Say what?" I asked her back, not understanding what she was getting at.

"Normally, Sagami-san shouldn't have been forgiven for abandoning her responsibilities and running away. However, when she returned here, it was as if she was like a victim from whatever crude words you had told her. She even had Hayama and her two friends as her witnesses. She was a perfect victim."

"You're reading into it too much. I didn't think that far ahead."

"Really? But results are results, and that's what it came down to. That's why I believe it's fine to say that you saved her."

No, that was wrong. It wasn't an act worthy of that kind of commendation. It wasn't an act deserving of acknowledgment or praise, but an act that should be denounced and blamed.

Once we made it to the exit of the gymnasium, I was finally able to give her an adequate response.

"Well, let's say that's true. But the only reason it worked out was because Hayama was there. So you can't exactly say it was thanks to me, right?" I answered.

Yukinoshita went quiet, looking slightly sullen.

"Oh, there you go again with the modesty."

It was a voice that resembled Yukinoshita's.

I looked at her and she shook her head indicating she hadn't said anything. I only realized moments after who it was from.

"...Nee-san, you're still here? Why don't you hurry up and go home?"

Appearing from near the door of the gymnasium was Yukinoshita Haruno and Hiratsuka-sensei.

Hiratsuka-sensei and Haruno-san were standing, the former with a cigarette in hand while the was ready to head home after getting changed.

Haruno-san tapped my shoulders. "Gosh, you're just awesome, Hikigaya-kun. I heard about what happened from everyone, you know. That heroism of yours really gets me going. It actually might be kind of a waste on Yukino-chan."

"The only wasteful thing around here is the time spent talking with you, nee-san. Hurry up and go home," said Yukinoshita, making light of her.

Haruno-san exaggerated a hurt expression. "You're so cold, Yukino-chan... Aren't we, like, total buddy-buddy after playing in the same band? Buddy-buddy sisters, even?"

Yukinoshita lifted her eyebrows as if that set her off. "You're one to talk. Who's the one that went off on a tangent during the performance? And who do you think was the one that had to follow with that?"

"Oh c'mon, what's the problem? It got everyone excited and all. Isn't that right, Hikigaya-kun?"

"Well, sure, things did get pretty crazy in there," I said.

Yukinoshita then blinked her eyes two to three times. "...You were watching?"

It looked like she didn't think I would be there. But I couldn't blame her for noticing me since I had gotten back at the very last minute. She was on the stage too, so obviously, she couldn't see me.

"Only the end... Well, what can I say? It was pretty darn good. After watching, I, uh, was really impressed."

I'm sure there were a ton of more words I could have picked to compliment her, but unable to find a good way to tell her, I could only manage a fragmented and crude impression.

Yukinoshita abruptly looked away in response to my vague reply.

"T...Than—That performance was far from perfect. It's not like I made any mistakes or anything, but more importantly, it was a complete mess. It's only because the audience was so excited that we managed to smooth it over, but in a more controlled situation, I'm sure it wouldn't be worth listening to, and also, the biggest fundamental problem was our lack of practice, and another cause was that not every member was in complete sync, but still, as I was the person in charge of

the main melody, I wasn't able to lead the entire song all the way, and as a result..."

"Woow, just look how embarrassed you are. You're so cute, Yukino-chan," said Haruno-san, interjecting.

Yukinoshita cleared her throat and then glared at her. "...Nee-san, why don't you hurry up and go home?"

"Okay, okay. I will, I will. I'll see you later then. I had a blast. I bet mom's going to be really surprised after hearing about today... right?"

That smile, as if testing her, caused Yukinoshita's expression to stiffen. After making sure of that, Haruno-san turned her back and walked off. I don't know what crossed Yukinoshita's mind when Haruno-san left with those words. The circumstances involving those two were still a mystery to me even now.

When the distance grew between Yukinoshita and Haruno-san, Hiratsuka-sensei folded her sleeve back and checked her wristwatch.

"It's almost time for the homeroom of the day. Hurry and return to your classes."

"I understand. I will see you later then." Yukinoshita's stiffness dissolved and she answered. After she gave a simple regards to Hiratsuka-sensei, she began walking. I followed after her.

"Okay, I'll be taking my leave too."

"Hikigaya..."

Her voice that called me to a stop was heavy.

When I turned around, Hiratsuka-sensei had a stumped smile.

"How should I say this...? The slogan was one thing and Sagami was another, but I really think you contributed quite a bit to the end result. You caused the Planning Committee to start acting, and you also managed a scapegoat for Sagami."

She interrupted her words there. That period was, mostly like, to prepare for something. Not for herself, but for me.

"But I honestly can't praise you." Hiratsuka-sensei extended her hand to my cheeks. They gently supported me, not allowing me to avert my eyes. "Hikigaya. Helping others isn't a good reason to hurt yourself."

The indistinct smell of tobacco and the contradicting softness of her fingertips. Her eyes tinged with moisture were as if they could see right through my heart.

"No, it's not like I'm hurt or anything..."

"...Even if you're used to the pain as well. You need to realize already that there are people who will find it painful to see you hurt like this." She tapped my shoulders. "That's the end of your lecture. Go on ahead."

“Right...”

I parted from her with a single word and headed for my classroom.

But even when I turned the hallway, I could still feel her gentle eyes seeing me off.

× × ×

The classroom was noisy with the lingering enthusiasm of the Cultural Festival.

The homeroom of the day was just a simple formality so once the class officer wrapped it up with a meddlesome speech, the conversations shifted to the celebration party afterwards.

In which case, that had nothing to do with me. Heck, there was even a speechless pressure that told me that I didn't need to come.

I hurried and got ready to go home since it would have been painful refusing an invitation that was extended to me out of consideration.

Though for an instant, I found myself being pointlessly concerned about whether Sagami was going to take part with the class or the Planning Committee.

What remained in the hallway were the remnants of friendship and passion of every class.



The Sunday tomorrow was a day off. Monday was a holiday. The entire morning of Tuesday would be spent cleaning up by every class. Until then, everything would be left as monumental memories. And after we finished cleaning up, we would turn towards a new event of our youth and go straight towards it.

I was probably going to be a part of that class cleanup as well. The excuse of being a Cultural Festival Planning Committee member was today, henceforth, invalid.

... Well, that said, I still had some leftover work.

I adjusted the bag on my shoulders.

Inside my bag were memo notes of reports that needed to be organized by the assistant historians. My final job was to aggregate the memo notes given to me by the other assistant historians into a single report. Before I could input them into a computer, I needed to extract out specific information from them.

If I was at home, I would probably fall asleep and if I was at a restaurant, it would have been too full. There was the chance fellow students might be killing time there until the celebration party too. So I wanted to avoid working at those places.

My feet naturally carried me to a quiet place where I could concentrate.

In the special building with no one around, I walked down the hallway and noticed the cold air. We were starting to get deep into autumn.

It's been half a year since I had started passing through this hallway and started going to club.

I arrived at the room of the Service Club and placed my hand on the door. It was that moment that I realized I didn't have the key. Normally, I never had to worry about it, since she would always arrive here first. But today, there was no proof she would be here.

I removed my hand from the door, thinking I should just give up and head home.

But the handle of the door was oddly light.

I went ahead and opened the door.

It was an unchanging, extremely normal classroom.

However, if there was something completely out of place, it was because there was a single girl inside.

Under the setting sun, she was quietly moving her pen.

This painting like scenery gave the illusion that even if the world had ended, she would, without a doubt, still be here in this room.

The moment I saw that, both my body and mind stopped.

—Against my better judgment, I was fascinated.

Noticing that I was standing there idly, Yukinoshita gently placed her pen on the desk.

“Oh, welcome. Most hated man on campus.”

“You pickin’ a fight...?”

“What happened with the celebration party? You’re not going?”

“Don’t bother asking something you already know the answer to,” I said, answering her instead of her question.

Yukinoshita smiled cheerfully. She was probably going to say something outrageous again with that sweet smile of hers.

“So? How does it feel to be so hated?”

“Heh, actually having your existence recognized is a pretty good feeling,” I said.

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her temple as if holding back a headache and sighed. “I’m not sure if I should find that amazing or shocking... You really are strange... But I don’t particularly hate that part of you that affirms weakness like that.”

“Yeah, I don’t hate it either. In fact, I just *love* that part about myself.”

Yaaaay, I’m the best. I’m going to start working despite badmouthing myself, I’mso cool. If I didn’t encourage myself this way, I had the feeling my heart was going to break.

I took out the memos from my bag and began organizing them. I almost forgot the reason why I came here.

Speaking of which, why was Yukinoshita here?

“So, what are you doing here?”

“I need to fill out the career aspiration survey. I didn’t have enough time to do it since I was too busy with the Cultural Festival preparations. I can finally get it done now that everything’s calmed down.” Yukinoshita answered and went back to writing. But her hand just wouldn’t move. In place of hand, her mouth moved. “What did you come here to do?”

“I need to organize the reports. I wanted to do it at a quiet place where I can concentrate,” I said, moving my pen.

Yukinoshita focused her gaze at my hand. “I see... We think similarly.”

“We don’t have very many options in the first place. It’s what happens when two loners meet on a convergent evolutionary path. It doesn’t mean you and I are similar at all.”

Most likely, both Yukinoshita and I had come here only because we were seeking out a quiet place. The places we could act weren’t very many and it just so happened that we inhabited the same place that we came across each other. In

reality, we lived in nearby cities, yet we had never stumbled across each other once. It's only because we were on campus that we could meet like this.

While Yukinoshita and I were alone for similar reasons, we were completely different people.

—*Right.*

—*She and I aren't similar in the least.*

—*Maybe that's why. Maybe that's why, whenever we exchange words like this, it always feels refreshing and pleasant.*

—*I felt the remaining passion from the festival welling up in my body. I posed the question again and the new answer I arrived at is my conclusion.*

—*So maybe.*

—*So maybe she and I.*

“...Hey, Yukinoshita. We can—”

“I'm sorry, that's impossible.”

“Gah! I didn't even get to finish, damn it.”

Yukinoshita went and firmly denied me. She chuckled, finding it funny somehow.

“Didn't I say it before? That it's out of the question for me to be friends with you.”

“That so...?”

“That's right. I do not lie, after all.”

Sure, but you do say some rude and outrageous things, though.

But I couldn't ignore those words. I decided to not to force my ideals on others. I think this was a good time for both Yukinoshita and me to be freed from that curse.

“No, it's fine if you want to lie. I do it all the time.” In fact, I just lie and lie and lie all the way. That's me.¹ “It's not a big deal if you lie about not knowing something. It's more ridiculous to not be okay with it only to force it later.”

It should've gotten through to Yukinoshita with just this.

That is, what it was that I was talking about and when.

The morning of the school entrance ceremony.

On the first day of the high school enrollment, I was involved in a car accident. It was just my luck to leave as early as possible on the day of the entrance ceremony, feeling giddy about being able to start a new school life.

It was about seven. Yuigahama was walking her dog in the neighborhood near the high school where she lost her grasp on her leash and at a bad time, the limousine Yukinoshita was riding had come by.

Those were the circumstances of the accident.

That's why it was only after that accident that Yukinoshita Yukino knew Hikigaya Hachiman.

But even so, she said she didn't know me. Not once did she ever bring up the accident. And this was the girl who would clearly say more things than she really needed to.

The long, long silence continued.

In the evening approaching club room, Yukinoshita remained looking down, unmoving.

Staying still, I could hear just her voice.

"...I'm not lying. I mean, I didn't know you at all."

It was as though she was continuing an exchange we had some time ago.

However, different this time was what came after.

Yukinoshita lifted her face.

She gazed at me, straight on, and smiled. "...But now, I know you."

I looked at her expression and I finally understood.

"Really..."

"Yes, really," said Yukinoshita as if in triumph.

Crap, I really just couldn't win against her. If she's going to tell me something like that with that cute of a face, how could I even say anything back?

Suddenly, the words of the fox came to mind.

—Words are the source of misunderstandings, after all.

How completely true.

You can't clear misunderstandings. There will always be things you can't undo in life and your mistaken answers will stay as they are.

That's why instead, you should give up on them and pose the question again.

All for the sake of knowing a new and correct answer.

Both Yukinoshita and I didn't know each other.

What is it we should have to call it "knowing"? We didn't understand that.

Had we just watched each other, then we could have understood too. What is essential is invisible to the eye. That's because we would avert our eyes.

I would.



We would.

In the span of almost half a year, we were finally able to know that we existed.

Our statues were constructed from just our names and fragmentary impressions of each other, like that of mosaic, burying one fragment one by one until we were able to make up virtual images of each other.

And surely enough, those images probably weren't even real.

Well, that didn't matter right now.

With the end of the long break and the short festival, finally returning were the worthless and hopeless days of everyday life.

On the door came knocks that were as though they were the footsteps of that everyday life.

“Yahallo!”

The one who opened the door was Yuigahama Yui.

But I couldn't figure out the reason for why she would come here. Shouldn't she be at the celebration party somewhere right now?

“Yuigahama? You need something?”

“Good work with the Cultural Festival! So let's go hit up the after-festival event!”

“Not going. So, what's this about an after-festival event?”

“You don't even know and you refused!? C'mon, Yukinon, let's gooo!”

Yuigahama sat at the usual seat situated beside Yukinoshita and shook Yukinoshita's body like a spoiled child. Although Yukinoshita looked somewhat bothered, she didn't push her away.

“I don't know too much about it myself, but what exactly is it?” asked Yukinoshita.

Yuigahama looked up at the empty ceiling. “U-Um... It's kinda like a big kind of celebration or something...?”

“What the, you don't even know either...”

I shuddered to Yuigahama's overly vague comprehension and Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin.

“Judging by the word, can I interpret it as the opposite of the eve of a festival?”

“That's it!” Yuigahama pointed at Yukinoshita, praising her for the correct answer. Did she really get it right...?

Yuigahama continued with her vague explanation.

“Hayato-kun and the others planned it and it’s at the live house near the station! They started talking about inviting a lot of other people and not just from our class too, see...”

“I see. So that’s why you wanted to invite Hikigaya-kun too.”

“No, I’m part of their class too. I’m included in the former already. Right?”

I had to confirm out of anxiety.

“Uh huh, just barely. Hayato-kun did say to invite Hikki too.”

“What do you mean by barely...? As in barely part of the class or barely not part of the class? Forget that, I’m the one who wants to refuse here. As if I’ll accept Hayama casting me his patronage.”

I’m not so painfully pathetic that I need an invitation of pity. These obligatory formalities that did nothing but cause unhappiness for both parties need to be done away with already.

To appease my temper, Yukinoshita spoke with a guiding and soft tone. “You don’t need to be so headstrong about it. It’s a wonderful invitation, no? Why not join them? Hikicasting-kun.”

“Hey, don’t casually say my name wrong. Anyway, what the heck is Hikicasting? Don’t go making me a part of the cast because you feel like it, okay?”

First off, I could never take up the role of being someone’s foil. At best, I could be a mob character or a wicked assistant. As a matter of fact, it’s possible I was no longer an actor.

“N-Now now... It’s a good opportunity so let’s go.”

“I’m fine here. Even if I went, I’ll just be hanging out at the corner of the wall somewhere. Having a guy like that ruining the mood would make me feel bad,” I said, and went back to organizing the reports.

Work was good... It makes for a convenient excuse when refusing people. If I became a corporate slave, my loner life would accelerate even faster.

“...That’s true. Besides, this after-festival party isn’t a part of the Planning Committee, so I don’t really see a reason to go.”

“Ehhh!? We can’t do anything about Hikki since he has work, but Yukinon is...” said Yuigahama and Yukinoshita began writing something as well.

“Yukinon, what are you writing?”

“Career aspiration survey.”

“Ohhh... Okay, I’ll wait until you’re done!”

“I didn’t say a thing about going...”

It looked like Yuigahama was positioned to wait. Yukinoshita said so in bafflement, but Yuigahama was watching over her with a smile. Ahh, she’s going

to take her along at this rate... If she said she's going to wait, then she's going to wait. She's a faithful dog.

The deep reddened evening sunlight poured into the club room.

The festival had ended.

What's done is done.

You can never redo things in life. Even the curtains on this hopeless act will be drawn eventually.

But knowing fully well that one day I would lament over the things that I had lost, I concluded the written reports.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Watari Wataru.

It sure is spring! And speaking of spring, it's the season of meetings and also the season of break ups. It's something like "which is it!?", but I want to break up with work already and meet up with vacation though? Oh?

But, really, in the world, the phrase "which is it, huh?" is said way too much, right?

For example, deadlines! When you hear the word deadline, it's normal to think "I better make it (life on the line)", but part of it is more to make you blurt out things like "Hahaan, it's a lying schedule to get me to panic and to motivate me! Just two more weeks to go!"

In addition, words differed when it came to the word "deadline". A certain person answers with "j-just a little more (big lie)", a different certain individual responds with "that's obviously impossible (distant eyes)", and that certain person says again "let me rest already... (crying voice)".

The meaning of words might be influenced by factors like circumstances and a person's sense of values and accomplishments. Words that are concrete would mean as they are, but it applies more so with words that tried to point out abstract concepts. For example, things like growth, change, and things that are genuine. If you talked about them, it's likely that everyone would have a different interpretation of what was said.

If that's the case, the things conveyed through words are unexpectedly abundant. But that's why even if you thought you conveyed something or you thought you could convey something, it's likely that wasn't the case at all and ultimately, the side that conveyed something was just drowning in self-satisfaction. While thinking novels were pretty much exactly like that, I am writing today as well.

——Even so, that's why I hope his self-satisfaction, even if it's just now, is also his happiness as well.

So with that, this was "Yahari Ore no Seishun Rabu Kome ha Machigatteiru." Volume 9.

Word of thanks to the following.

Divinity Ponkon8. I look forward to seeing the rough drafts of the cover for every volume, but the tension really went off the roof past the top level for Hiratsuka-sensei following Komachi. Wonderful! Thank you very much.

Editor-in-charge Hoshino-sama. Oh, no worries, next one will be easy, gahaha! Just how much longer will I be able to continue saying this... I apologize

as always for everything. Thank you very much. Oh, no worries, next one will be easy, gahaha!

Also, the book, “The Gift of the Magi” (Written O. Henry/Translated by Yuuki Hiroshi) was used in this volume.

Finally, to all of the readers of this series. Thanks to you all, this story is nearing the final stages. It will be continuing just for a little longer. I will be very happy if you can accompany me until the end. Again, due to all your support, the second season of the anime was green-lighted. Thank you very much.

Now then, with that all being said, I have now used up all my space and I will stop my writing as of here.

A certain day in March, while the storm of spring rages on, I create a tower of empty MAX Coffee cans,

Watari Wataru

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Author : Watari Wataru

Illustrator : Ponkan 8

Translator : Excorsism/Spyro
<https://kyakka.wordpress.com>